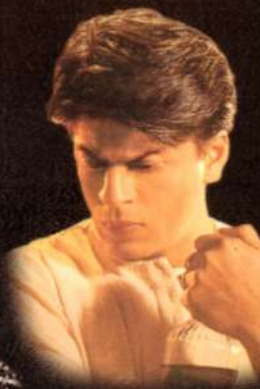




SARATCHANDRA
CHATTOPADHYAY



Devdas

PENGUIN BOOKS

DEVADAS

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay was born on 15 September 1876 in Devanandapur, a village in West Bengal. His childhood and youth were spent in dire poverty and he received very little formal education. But he began writing as a teenager and was soon to become one of the best-loved Bengali novelists of all time.

Saratchandra came to maturity at a time when the nationalist movement was gathering momentum together with an awakening of social consciousness. Much of his writing bears the marks of the resultant turbulence in society. In his hands, the novel became a powerful weapon of social and political reform. Sensitive and daring, his novels captivated the hearts and minds of thousands of readers not only in Bengal but all over India.

Apart from *Devdas* (1917), some of Saratchandra's best-known novels are *Palli Samaj* (1916), *Charitraheen* (1917), *Nishkriti* (1917), *Grihadaha* (1920), *Pather Dabi* (1926), *Sesh Prasna* (1929) and *Srikanta* (in four parts, 1917, 1918, 1927 and 1933).

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay died in 1938.

Sreejata Guha has an MA in Comparative Literature from State University of New York at Stony Brook. She has worked as a translator and editor with Stree Publications and Seagull Books in Kolkata, and now works with Jacaranda Press in Bangalore. She has previously translated *Picture Imperfect*, a collection of Byomkesh Bakshi stories, and Taslima Nasrin's novel *French Lover* for Penguin.

Devdas

A Novel

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay

Translated from the Bengali by Sreejata Guha



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi 110 017, India

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto M4P 2Y3

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Group (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Penguin Books India 2002

This translation copyright © Penguin Books India 2002

All rights reserved

10 9

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Typeset in Minion-Regular by S.R. Enterprises, New Delhi

Printed at Anubha Printers, Noida

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser and without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above-mentioned publisher of this book.

INTRODUCTION

Speak the name 'Devdas' and the mind conjures up the visage of a haggard, world-weary, lovelorn soul, driving himself to drink and hurtling on relentlessly on the path to self-destruction. The 'Devdas metaphor', a time-honoured, enduring tragic symbol of unfulfilled love, has captivated readers and film-going audiences for the better part of a century now. But interest in the original *Devdas*, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *piece de resistance*, has been rekindled recently in the wake of the Sanjay Leela Bhansali film, which is an adaptation of the Bengali novel. This is a good time to take a fresh look at the novel in translation, and to look at the specific ways in which the Devdas metaphor has engaged our imagination over several generations.

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* was published in Bengali in 1917. It was written when the novelist was at the height of his powers, in the midst of his most productive phase. *Palli Samaj* had been published the previous year, in 1916. The year 1917 saw the publication in book form of *Charitraheen*, *Nishkriti* and the first part of *Srikanta*—three of the novels Saratchandra is best remembered by—apart from *Devdas*.

It was also a time when the forty-year-old writer had just experienced his meteoric rise to fame. Born in Devanandapur, a village in West Bengal, in 1876, Saratchandra had spent his

childhood in dire poverty. Having spent some of his youth in Bhagalpur and Muzaffarpur, he left for Burma in 1903, at the age of twenty-seven, after the death of his father. It was from Burma that he started sending his stories and novels to Calcutta journals. *Yamuna* started serializing *Charitraheen* (which had been written as early as 1903) while *Bharatvarsha* staked claim to the serialization of *Srikanta*. When the stories first began to appear, readers were convinced that writing of such quality could come only from Rabindranath Tagore, Bengal's ruling literary deity, who was perhaps writing under a pseudonym. When it was realized that Bengal was in fact celebrating the arrival of a great new talent on its literary horizons, Saratchandra became a literary sensation overnight.

In 1916 Saratchandra returned to Calcutta from Burma. In 1917 he took up residence in a comfortable house in Samtabed, on the outskirts of Calcutta, and dedicated his life to writing. He was to become India's first professional writer—a person who earned his entire livelihood only from writing. He was also to become the most popular novelist of his time, and this was not without reason.

The Bengali novel, which had been kick-started into existence by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay with his historical romances in the mid-nineteenth century, was taken a step forward by Rabindranath Tagore, who brought in lyrical, evocative descriptions and a realistic base for both characters and situations, in the early twentieth century. Saratchandra was evidently influenced by Rabindranath in his earlier writings, but the novels of his peak period represented nothing less than a revolution in the way literature was being approached: these were books that were

essentially not about ideas, events or even narrative cruxes—they were about *people*. Perhaps for the first time in modern Indian literature, the day-to-day lives of ordinary people, complete with their joys, heartbreaks and their thoughts, became the matter of the narrative. Saratchandra was at the forefront of a movement of realistic fiction that would find many followers in the course of the twentieth century.

Saratchandra would come to be known as a *katha sahityik*—a master storyteller, and this moniker is well deserved. Much of the success of his stories can be attributed to his treatment. His narratives are character-driven, but the characters are not described; they are allowed to develop and reveal themselves to the reader in the course of the story. The dialogues, which form a large part of his novels, are sharply etched, picked up, as it were, from the lips of living people. Descriptions and analyses, kept to a minimum, support the character development. All of these devices enable the reader to 'get into' the story themselves, to reconstruct it in their own imagination.

These methods are used to perfection in *Devdas*, one of Saratchandra's first books as a professional author. Readers will not need to be reminded of the power and effectiveness of the early scenes between Devdas and Parvati, the scene where she proposes marriage to him, or their meeting on the riverbank just before her marriage. The drama is enhanced by some telling touches—the solitary conchshell that blows out during Devdas's last talk with Parvati, signalling the closing of their days, even as Devdas asks the chillingly futile question, 'Can you run away with me tonight?'; or Parvati's last pathetic comment on the dead Devdas: 'All night...'

The scenes between Devdas and Chandramukhi are etched out equally economically. What happens as a result is that the reader, having seen the characters at high points of drama but not having been told much about them besides, is forced to *think* about them. These are the means by which this sparse and simple 30,000-word novel is able to assume proportions larger than itself.

There are two other reasons why the narrative of *Devdas* captivates the imagination. Firstly, the four principal characters—Devdas, Parvati, Chandramukhi and Chunilal—are as convincing as any quartet can be. This has to do with the fact that all of them are drawn to some extent from real life, and find parallels in Saratchandra's autobiographical masterpiece *Srikanta*, the first and second parts of which were written at around the same time as *Devdas*. During his childhood, Saratchandra's playmate was a girl called Paru, who appears as Rajlakshmi in *Srikanta* and as the young Paru/Paro in *Devdas*. Rajlakshmi reappears later in *Srikanta* as the courtesan PEARI Bai, who is quite similar to Chandramukhi in *Devdas*. This development of Rajlakshmi's character also hints at a parallel between Parvati and Chandramukhi, a parallel that is quickly outlined in *Devdas* through their similar Mother-images, and finally made obvious in the last chapter when Devdas visualizes them side by side. Rajendrananth, a friend of Saratchandra's young adulthood in Bhagalpur who introduced him to the forbidden pleasures of alcohol, tobacco and dancing girls, appears in *Devdas* as Chunilal; the character is modeled closely after that of Indranath's in *Srikanta*. Devdas himself is perhaps not so closely drawn from the author himself as Srikanta is, but the novel nevertheless echoes with experiences drawn from real life.

The other factor that contributes to the success of *Devdas* as literature is that its narrative is delicately nuanced. Supposedly the heroine of the ultimate tale of tragic love, Parvati addresses her hero throughout the novel as 'Dev-da', 'elder brother', a perennial throwback to the childhood days when the two were playmates, which gives us an insight into the complexity of the affection between the two. It should also not be overlooked that one of Devdas's final realizations while he is still in his senses (in Bombay) is that: 'Paro was more than a sister to him—and then there was Chandramukhi'. It is Chandramukhi, the 'other woman', who Devdas insists on calling 'bou', wife. When she asks him why, he simply says, 'Don't ask me the reason.' It is Chandramukhi that he provides for like a husband would. As for Parvati, it is necessary that he wound her just before her marriage, so that she has a mark 'to remember [their] last meeting'. Even this apparently impulsive violent act can yield further meaning if one is intent on pursuing it as a close reader of the text. Much later, from Chandramukhi's description of Devdas, we learn that he has a prominent mark on his left brow—and it is the left brow on which he gives Parvati a mark. One could read this as the effort of the self to impart similitude to its alter-ego if one wanted to. *Devdas* abounds in such little doublings and reflections that drag the reader deeper into the narrative frame. Essentially, the story of *Devdas* is a reformulation of the Krishna-Radha-Meera story; but the realistic character delineation and complexities of human feeling introduced into this structure fashions an entirely different text out of the fabular triangle.

But Devdas—who is Devdas? He is certainly not the conventional romantic hero, admirable and desirable, a Krishna archetype. Nor,

by any means, is he Everyman—a personification of the trials and tribulations that every person suffers in love, who each reader can immediately identify and empathize with. In his demeanour, Devdas is quite un-hero-like—he is uncertain in his actions, fatalistic in his outlook, maudlin in his responses. A recounting of his 'love story' shows him in pretty poor light: when Parvati, his childhood sweetheart, proposes that he marry her, he is unable to face up to parental opposition and rejects her; subsequently, in a letter, he also says that he has no desire to marry her. As soon as the letter is posted, however, he realizes that he is actually in love with Parvati. He rushes to her and asks her to marry him, but by now her marriage has been fixed elsewhere and it is her turn to refuse him. Heartbroken, Devdas drives himself to drink and destitution. Through his friend Chunilal, he meets the courtesan Chandramukhi, who falls in love with him. But though he comes to care for Chandramukhi, Devdas can never forget Parvati; as his health deteriorates and he leaves Calcutta, Chandramukhi is left alone. Devdas's last conscious act is to try to travel to Parvati's house to see her once before he dies, to fulfil a promise he had made. But he arrives in the middle of the night, already unconscious, and dies in the morning, not having met her.

Devdas's tale evokes pathos more than anything else. In the last paragraph of the book, the author too asks only that a tear be shed for Devdas—because no one deserves to die the lonely, uncared-for death that he suffers. He is clearly not anyone's idea of a fallen hero who can inspire awe or fear; and yet his presence looms large over the narrative. To Parvati, clearly, Devdas is a paragon among men despite all his faults. Chandramukhi, too, finds him

infinitely charming. 'There isn't a woman on earth who would deny herself this heaven,' she says of his company. Chandramukhi and Parvati, like most of Saratchandra's women, are strong, proactive and indomitable. Much of the lovelight that Devdas is shown in is therefore reflected glory. It is Parvati and Chandramukhi's love for him that sustains the narrative; it is their love that makes things *happen*.

Devdas, by comparison, seems to revel in inaction. The only sustained activity he indulges in is to drink himself to death. There seems to be little else he is really interested in; even his passion for Parvati, apparently the driving force in his life, is not palpable except as a negative force in the dregs of the nadir to which he pushes himself. It is this negativity through which the character best expresses itself, in his letter of rejection to Parvati, in his inability to love Chandramukhi, in his very lack of desire to live. It is in scenes of desolation, alone on a bench in Eden Gardens all night, as a blighted presence at his father's funeral, on endless train journeys to unfixed destinations, that Devdas is in his element. At such moments, he assumes the stature of a Shiva-figure, the fabular consort of Parvati, the destroyer of the universe. And yet, Devdas's negativity does not lead to nihilism. The most significant thing about Devdas is that he exists; in true existentialist fashion, he makes a statement merely by existing. The statement he makes is about the vagaries, the cruelty, the pointlessness of a life struck by unfulfilled love, and this is where, ultimately, the novel succeeds.

Of his portrayal of Devdas in the recent Sanjay Leela Bhansali film, Shahrukh Khan said, 'I played him as a metaphor, not as a character.' Incidentally, in Saratchandra's novel, too, it is as a metaphor that Devdas succeeds. The specific events in his life are incidental;

it is as a metaphor for unfulfilled love that he captures the readers' imagination. But how does this ineffective, wilful and mercurial character take such a strong hold on the modern imagination as to gain the status of a metaphor? The answer possibly lies in the flexibility with which the character and his world are imbued by the author. Saratchandra fashioned *Devdas* a bit like an empty wine glass—or, as some modern theorists would have it, as an 'open text'. As the novel lives on in your mind, it can hold any love story that you pour into it, it is able to give shape to any imaginative turn of the story you may choose to invent. The specific story of Devdas, Parvati and Chandramukhi the way it appeared in the 1917 novel is only one of the possible stories. Other stories can constantly be added on to the core motif of love, loss, desolation and destruction that *Devdas* belongs to—and they strengthen the metaphor and produce an increasingly palimpsestic text, rich with individual re-creations and reinterpretations. The Devdas metaphor is ultimately detachable from the text of *Devdas*, and this is what lays it open to cultural transitions, adaptations, and new versions. In this adaptability lies the principal strength of the novel, and this is certainly one of the reasons why the story has been so universally popular ever since it was first told.

Devdas is a story that cries out to be made your own, and this may well be one of the reasons why the novel has consistently fired filmmakers' imaginations—not only in Bengali and Hindi, but also in languages like Tamil and Malayalam. The first film of the novel—by Pramathesh Barua—was released just before Saratchandra's death in 1938. The Hindi version of the bilingual gave cinema its first memorable Devdas in the form of K.L. Saigal. The subsequent

Dilip Kumar-Vyjayanthimala-Suchitra Sen starrer directed by Bimal Roy (which followed the novel closely) is still considered a classic of the celluloid screen. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* lends to the story an opulent, extravagant backdrop, making for a visual treat that showcases the story like an illuminated jewel. Each new interpretation has brought a fresh cadence to the original story, and has brought it alive for a new generation of viewers. In many ways *Devdas* has in fact become a part of the collective unconscious of Hindi cinema—while films like *Pyaasa* and *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar*, for instance, are direct take-offs on it, films like *Amar Prem* and *Prem Roghze* built on specific aspects of Saratchandra's story, the Devdas-Chandramukhi relationship and the early days of Devdas and Paro, respectively.

A quick look at the most recent and most celebrated version of *Devdas*—the Sanjay Leela Bhansali film—will reveal the way in which the Devdas metaphor works in adaptation. Bhansali's extravaganza is billed as 'an eternal love story'; it consciously attempts to elevate the Devdas-Paro romance to a superhuman, semi-mythic level, signified by a diya that cannot be extinguished while Devdas is alive. But while the characters are elevated in stature, the story has undergone a simplification that puts paid to some of the complexities that abound in the original. In Bhansali's film, Parvati and Devdas's love for each other is declared and manifest; it is only parental opposition that thwarts it, not indecision. The mark Devdas leaves on Parvati here becomes a bloodmark similar to the sindoor at the hair parting, thus codifying the relationship between the two in more obvious ways than in the novel.

Similarly, the clarification that the relationships between Devdas and Chandramukhi and Paro and her husband remain

unconsummated—an issue not tackled openly by Saratchandra—makes matters simpler for a viewer receptive to the idea of an idealized love between Devdas and Parvati. Family intrigue holds centrestage in the film: Devdas is disinherited because of the schemings of his sister-in-law, and Parvati's villainous son-in-law reveals her liaison with Devdas to her husband. As a result, Parvati is ordered never to go out of the haveli, and it is the closing doors of the haveli that prevent her from having a last glimpse of the dying Devdas at the end of the film. Fate is less quirky here, and more predictable than in Saratchandra's text. In the novel, the reader is struck by Devdas's helplessness because he simply does not know what to expect next; the recent film is a much more structured text that allows the viewer to be struck by the pathos of inevitability that is inherent in Devdas's downfall.

Bhansali's most significant departure from Saratchandra is to have Parvati and Chandramukhi meet and bond with each other in something of a parallel to the Devdas-Chunilal bonding; this narrative twist too engenders its own set of consequences, which have a bearing on the final tragic moment. Numerous other constructions in the film—for instance the scene where Devdas catches hold of a pundit and asks to have his own last rites done—are not drawn from the original novel but reflect inter-textually on the body of Saratchandra's work and on the milieu that *Devdas* belongs to. Though in a sense these are departures from the novel-text, such interpolations do not irk because they are part of an integrated vision that lies behind the new *Devdas*. The point is that though the thrust points of the narrative are located differently in Bhansali's film text, the core text is that of the *Devdas* that has been with readers and audiences over decades, as a metaphor if not as a written text.

Audiences have no difficulty in recognizing the text as that of the original *Devdas*, so long as the formulations of the new text are acceptable on their own terms. It is thus that *Devdas* reaches out to new generations—as readers take a fresh look at the metaphor of unfulfilled love that lies at the core of the text, and as interpreters use a new language that brings the text alive for new audiences.

It was a pleasure to work on this translation when *Devdas* is so much in the news, and I am grateful to Penguin India for commissioning this translation. In translating Saratchandra I have tried to retain the colloquial ease with which his narrative flows and lent to the dialogues the jauntiness or sometimes the quiet, reflective aura that the original is infused with. With the exception of changing Paru's name to Paro (to facilitate ease of access to the non-Bengali pronunciation and imagination), I haven't been aware of taking any liberties with the text. The responsibility for all blights and blots, of course, is mine alone. My biggest debt of gratitude is to my editor Udayan Mitra, who has been so supportive and generous with his help that this book owes its life to him. As usual, all friends and family, my husband Dipankar and daughter Bhuvana, have rallied around and bolstered my effort with warmth, sensibility and the occasional quirkiness. One final acknowledgment: the act of translation involves listening ... to the author, to readers across the ages and to many intra- and inter-textual echoes. If I have succeeded in any measure, the credit goes to Swapna Guha, my mother, who taught me to listen to the voices around me.

Bangalore

Sreejata Guha

July 2002

Chapter 1

It was a scorching summer afternoon. The sun blazed down relentlessly and the heat lapped around in waves. Devdas of the Mukherjee household sat in a corner of the schoolroom, on a worn, old mat with a slate in hand and a bored expression written all across his face. He closed his eyes, opened them again, stretched his legs, yawned and pondered over the available options. In a minute he decided that it was pointless wasting the entire afternoon sitting around in the schoolroom instead of roaming the fields and flying kites. In his fertile mind a plan seemed to take shape. He stood up, slate in hand.

It was lunch break in the school. With hoops, yells and vigorous gesticulations, a bunch of boys were playing marbles under the tree nearby. Devdas glanced at them once. He wasn't allowed to go out for lunch because Govinda Master, the teacher, had noticed that Devdas wasn't inclined to come back into the schoolroom if he ever left it. His father had also placed an embargo on his going out. It had been decided that Devdas would spend the lunch hour under the supervision of the class monitor.

The only people in the room at this point were the teacher (who lay with his eyes closed, catching his forty winks after lunch), and Bhulo the class monitor who sat on a broken bench in one

corner of the room, pretending to be the teacher and casting the occasional contemptuous glance towards the boys at play and sometimes at Devdas and Parvati. Parvati had been in the school for a month or so. Perhaps she had grown really attached to the teacher and so she sat there, intently sketching his sleeping figure on the last page of her alphabet book; like an earnest artist she looked up now and then to check how close her portrait was to the original. It wasn't much of a likeness, but for what it was worth, Parvati seemed to derive great satisfaction from it.

Devdas stood up, slate in hand, and addressed Bhulo. 'I can't get the sums right.'

With a solemn face, Bhulo asked calmly, "Which one?"

"Rithmetic."

'Let me have the slate.' Bhulo's manner was that of the erudite teacher who only had to get his hands on the slate in order to sort the problem out. Devdas handed him the slate and stood close to him. Bhulo began to read aloud as he wrote, 'If one maund of oil costs fourteen rupees, then—'

At this juncture something happened. The class monitor had maintained his seat upon the broken, wobbly bench for the last three years, in keeping with his elevated status. Behind him stood a stack of lime. Govinda Master had procured it for a song at some point in the past with the intention of using it to plaster the walls. When the time would present itself was still unknown. But he took great care of this stack of white powder. Just so that some callous, unwise young fellow may not get to ruin even a grain of it, he had entrusted it to the care of Bholanath, the class monitor, who was relatively older and quite the favourite. Hence Bhulo had taken up his seat at that precise spot.

Bhulo wrote, 'If one maund of oil costs fourteen rupees, then... oh, oh, my God, he—lp . . .' and then all hell broke loose. Parvati shrieked loudly, stood clapping her hands, and finally rolled on the ground, giggling. Govinda Master, who had just drifted into a sound sleep, roused himself, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. He saw that the boys who had been playing under the tree were now shouting and screaming as they headed away from there. At the same time he saw that a pair of legs was dangling about behind the bench and the stack of lime looked fairly ready to burst. He shouted, 'Hey, hey, what... what is it?'

There was just Parvati who could have told him anything. But she was in no condition to do so, since she was rolling on the ground, giggling and clapping. The teacher's question remained unanswered.

And then the snow-white Bholanath pushed his way out of the lime and stood up. The teacher shouted once again, 'You stupid oaf, that was you in there?'

'Yeah—ah—ah—'

'Stop that!'

'It was Deva, that bastard—he pushed—'rithmetic—'

'Don't start again, you oaf...'

By now the teacher had understood the whole sorry tale. He sat down and spoke in a solemn tone, 'So Devdas pushed you into the lime and fled, did he?'

Bhulo whimpered and nodded.

There was much shaking and brushing off to be done; but the white on his dark skin did make the class monitor look a little eerie and his sobs showed no signs of abating.

Govinda Master said again, 'So Devdas pushed you and ran off, eh?'

Bhulo said, 'Yeah ... yeah ...' and whined some more.

Govinda Master said, 'I won't let him get away with this.'

Bhulo said (with more sobs), 'Yeah ... yeah ...'

Govinda Master asked, 'Where has the boy ...?'

The group of boys burst in, panting and red-faced. 'We couldn't catch him. Ooh, the way he hurls those stones—'

'Couldn't catch him?'

Another boy repeated, 'Ooh, the stones—'

'Shut up.'

He gulped and moved to one side. The teacher, in his thwarted fury, yelled a bit at Parvati to start with; then he took Bholanath by the hand and said, 'Come, let's go and speak to Mukherjee-babu.'

This meant that he would now go and lodge a complaint to Narayan Mukherjee, the zamindar, about his son's behaviour.

It was around three in the afternoon. Narayan Mukherjee was seated outside, smoking on his hubble-bubble, and a servant was fanning him gently. He was taken aback by the sudden arrival of the teacher and his pupils, and exclaimed, 'Hello, Govinda.'

Govinda was a kayasth by caste. He bowed low before the brahmin zamindar and offered his respects. Then he pointed to Bhulo and narrated everything in great detail. Mukherjee-babu was irritated. He said, 'Well really, Devdas seems to be beyond control.'

'Please tell me what I should do.'

The zamindar laid down the pipe and asked, 'Where has he gone?'

'How do we know? He hurled stones at the boys that tried to catch him.'

For a while both were silent. Finally Mukherjee-babu said, 'I will do the needful once he gets back home.'

Govinda Master led his students back to the schoolroom and terrorized everyone with his fearsome expressions. He vowed that he wouldn't let Devdas into the schoolroom again, although he was the zamindar's son. That day school was let off a little early. On their way back the boys were full of chatter.

One said, 'Oof, did you see what a thug he is?'

Another said, 'It serves Bhulo right.'

'Oh, the way he hurls those stones!'

Another one was on Bhulo's side, 'He will take revenge, just you wait and see.'

'Oh but Devdas won't ever come to school again. So how will Bhulo take his revenge?'

Straggling behind this small bunch of boys, Parvati was also on her way home. She caught hold of one of the boys nearest to her and asked, 'Moni, will they really not allow Devda to come to school ever again?'

Moni said, 'No, never.'

Parvati moved away. She hadn't liked that.

Parvati's father's name was Nilkantha Chakravarty. He was the zamindar's neighbour, meaning that his small and ancient house stood next to the zamindar's huge, palatial mansion. He owned some land, had a few clients in whose homes he did the puja, and then there was kindness from the zamindar household—all in all, it was a comfortable life that he led.

On the way home, Parvati ran into Dharmadas. He was a servant in Devdas's house. For the last twelve years, ever since his infancy, Devdas had been looked after by Dharmadas. He dropped him off to school every morning and then picked him up again at

the end of the day. This was his daily routine; he was on his way to the school right now. When he saw Parvati he asked, 'Paro, where is your Dev-dada?'

'He ran away...'

Immensely surprised, Dharmadas said, 'What do you mean, ran away?'

Parvati recalled Bholanath's predicament once again and burst into giggles, 'Dhamma, you know, Dev-da—hee hee hee—in the lime stack—hoo hoo hoo—Dhamma, he fell on his face ...'

Dharmadas couldn't make out all of what she was saying. But he shared in her laughter. Then he sobered up and asked again, 'Tell me Paro, what happened?'

'Dev-da pushed Bhulo into the stack of lime and ran away—hee hee hee—'

Now Dharmadas got the whole picture and grew really worried. He said, 'Paro, do you know where he is now?'

'How should I know?'

'You do know... please tell me. Poor thing, he must be hungry by now.'

'He must be ... but I won't tell you.'

'Why not?'

'He will beat me up. I can go and give him the food.'

Dharmadas was appeased and said, 'Fine, you do that then. And mind you, see that he gets home before dark.'

'I will.'

Parvati came back home and found that her mother and Devdas's mother had both heard everything. She was grilled once again. She tried to repeat as much of the story as she could, holding

her laughter in check. Then she tied up some puffed rice in the anchal of her sari and set off for one of the many mango groves owned by the zamindar. This one was close to her house; at one end of it lay a bamboo clump. She knew that Devdas had cleared up a space in that clump, in order to smoke his hubble-bubble in peace. Whenever he needed a hideaway, this was the place that served him best.

When she got there, Parvati found Devdas sitting in the middle of the bamboo clump holding a small hookah and smoking like a wise old man. His face looked sombre and bore the traces of much concern. He was delighted to see Parvati, but he didn't show any of his pleasure. He continued to smoke and solemnly said, 'Come.'

Parvati came up to him and sat down. Immediately Devdas spotted what she had bundled up in her anchal. Without saying another word, he untied it and began to munch. Then he said, 'Paro, what did the master say?'

'He has complained to your father.'

Devdas put his hookah down, his eyes wide with surprise, and said, 'He has gone to Father?'

'Yes.'

'And?'

'They won't let you go into the school ever again.'

'And I don't want to go there either.'

By now Devdas's stock of puffed rice was almost at an end. He looked at Parvati and said, 'Give me the sweets.'

'I haven't brought any.'

'Then give me some water.'

'Where will I find water?'

Irritated, Devdas said, 'If you don't have anything, then why have you come? Go and fetch me some water.'

Parvati didn't like his tone. She said, 'I can't go again. Why don't you come and drink it yourself?'

'How can I go there now?'

'Are you planning to stay here for good?'

'At least for now. Later, I'll go away ...'

Parvati felt miserable. She felt like crying at this show of apparent disinterest from Devdas. She said, 'Dev-da, I'll come too.'

'Where? With me? Are you crazy?'

Parvati shook her head and said, 'I *will* too.'

'First go and get me the water.'

'No. You will run away.'

'I won't.'

But Parvati couldn't trust him and so she continued to sit there. Devdas ordered her once again, 'Go, I tell you.'

'I cannot go.'

Angry, Devdas grabbed her hair and commanded, 'Go.'

Parvati was silent. Then a hard fist landed on her back. 'Won't go, eh?'

Parvati burst into tears, 'I will not go.'

Devdas walked away. Parvati, sobbing hard, left the mango grove. She walked and walked, till she found herself right in front of Devdas's father. Mukherjee-babu was very fond of Parvati. He said, 'Paro, child, why are you crying?'

'Dev-da has beaten me.'

'Where is he?'

'He was smoking his hookah, sitting in the bamboo grove.'

Mukherjee-babu was already upset by the complaint lodged by the teacher and this fresh piece of news made him see red. He said, 'Has Deva taken to smoking?'

'Yes, he does. Every day. He hides his hookah in the bamboo grove

'Why have you never told me?'

'Because he will beat me.'

This wasn't entirely true. She had kept quiet because she didn't want Devdas to be punished. If she had spilled the beans today it was only because she was so mad at him. She was barely eight years old—too young to rein in her temper. But she was by no means immature.

At home she hit the bed and wept for a long time before finally drifting off to sleep. She didn't have any dinner.

Chapter 2

The next day Devdas got the hiding of his life. He was locked up the whole day. Finally, when his mother wept her heart out, he was let off. The following day he ran to Parvati's house, stood beneath her window and called, 'Paro, Pare'

Parvati opened her window and said, 'Dev-da.'

Devdas gestured for her to come down quickly. When they stood together, he asked, "Why did you tell them about the smoking?"

'Why did you hit me?'

'Why didn't you go and get the water?'

Parvati was silent.

Devdas said, 'You are a fool. Don't ever do that again.'

Parvati shook her head—she wouldn't.

'Let's go then, and carve out some fishing rods. Today we must go fishing.'

There was a dead tree near the bamboo clump. Devdas climbed it. With great effort he bent a nearby bamboo stem, handed it to Parvati and said, 'See that you don't let go, or I'll fall.'

Parvati held onto it for dear life. Devdas used it for support, climbed onto a dead limb and began to cut himself a fishing rod. Parvati asked, 'Dev-da, won't you go to school?'

'No.'

'Uncle will see that you go.'

'Father himself has said I won't go there anymore. A master will come home to teach me.'

Parvati grew a little worried. Then she said, 'Since yesterday school starts early in the morning, for summer. I will have to go now.'

Devdas looked down at her, breathing fire and said, 'No, you don't have to go.'

Parvati was a little absent-minded and the bamboo branch slipped out of her grasp and shot up in the air. Devdas fell to the ground. It wasn't that high up and so he wasn't hurt, but he was badly bruised. In anger, he picked up a dry stick and lashed out blindly at Parvati. It fell randomly on her back, her cheeks, everywhere. He bellowed, 'Go, get out of here.'

At first Parvati was ashamed at her carelessness; but when the stick began to lacerate her, she was filled with angry hurt. Her eyes burned fire as she promised, 'I am on my way to Uncle—'

Devdas became even more angry and hit out at her once more. 'Go on, tell him right now,' he screamed. As if I care.'

Parvati went away. When she had gone some distance, Devdas called out, 'Paro.'

Parvati heard him but pretended not to; she just walked on faster. Devdas called again, 'Oh Paro, come here and listen to me.'

Parvati didn't answer. Irritated, Devdas shouted, half to himself, 'Oh, go to hell.'

After she left Devdas managed to cut himself a few fishing rods. His heart wasn't in it, though.

Parvati came home in tears. The stick marks lay visible and blue on her pale cheeks. Grandma saw her first. She screamed, 'Oh

my God, who has beaten you so hard, Paro?' Parvati wiped her eyes and said, 'The school master.'

Grandma pulled her onto her lap and vehemently said, 'Come on, let's go to Narayan and get this Master fixed. You poor thing, he's beaten you half to death.'

Parvati hung onto her grandma's neck and said, 'Let's go.'

When they arrived before Mukherjee-babu, Grandma called the teacher and his forefathers some choice names; the old lady's curses didn't bode well for the teacher's future. Finally she stopped for breath and then started afresh, 'Narayan, just look at the fellow's guts. He's a half-caste and he dares to raise his hand on a brahmin girl. Just see how he's beaten her.' Grandma began to trace the blue bruises on Parvati's tender cheeks with great sorrow.

Mukherjee-babu asked Parvati, 'Who has beaten you, Paro?'

Parvati was silent. Grandma had to shout at the top of her voice again, 'Who else? That bastard of a Master, that's who.'

'Why did he beat you?'

Again, Parvati didn't say a word. Mukherjee-babu realized that she must have been beaten for some offence. But this violence was uncalled for and that's what he said aloud too. Then Parvati showed her back and said, 'He beat me here too.'

The marks on the back were fiercer, more visible. So both the adults got very upset. Mukherjee-babu said he'd summon the teacher and look into the matter. And it was decided that there was no point in sending the child to such a school.

Parvati was thrilled with the decision and she happily clambered into Grandma's arms and came back to the interior of the house. But there she had to face her mother's inquisition. She took her to task, 'Tell me, why did he beat you?'

Parvati said, 'For no reason at all.'

Mother boxed her ears well and truly and said, 'No one beats people up for no reason at all.'

Luckily, Grandma was passing by. She stepped over the threshold and said, 'My dear, as a mother you can box her ears for no reason at all, and you mean to say that lout cannot?'

Mother said, 'I'm sure there was a reason. She's a quiet girl—she must have done something and so he beat her up.'

Irritated, Grandma said, 'Fine, that may be so. But I will not let her go back to that school'

'But she should study.'

'What's the point? If she can write a few letters and read a few lines of the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat*, it is more than enough. Your Paro is hardly likely to study law or become a barrister.'

Defeated, Mother fell silent.

That day Devdas tiptoed into the house with great fear in his heart. He had no doubt that Parvati had come and told everyone about his behaviour in the meantime. But when he came home, he saw no sign of trouble. Instead, he heard from his mother that Govinda Master had beaten Parvati severely and so she wouldn't go to school anymore.

Thrilled to bits, Devdas could barely stop to finish his meal. He managed to eat a few mouthfuls and then ran to Parvati. He was panting as he asked her, 'You won't be going to school anymore?'

- 'No.'

'How did this happen?'

'I said the Master has beaten me.'

Devdas grinned from ear to ear, patted her on the back and said that she was the brightest girl in the whole wide world. Then

he slowly examined the purple bruises on Parvati's cheeks, sighed deeply and said, 'Poor thing.'

Parvati smiled as she looked up at him, 'What is it?'

'It must have hurt like hell, right Paro?'

Parvati nodded.

'Oh dear, why do you do that then? It makes me so angry and then I hit you.'

Parvati's eyes filled with tears; she wanted to ask, 'Do what?' But she couldn't.

Devdas stroked her hair and said, 'Don't do it ever again, okay?'

Parvati shook her head and said, 'I won't.'

Devdas patted her back once again and said, 'Fine. I too won't hit you ever again.'

Chapter 3

The days passed blissfully. The two children were having the time of their lives. They roamed the fields all day long, came home late to be scolded and beaten, and next morning they were off again. They slept like babies at night, tired as they were. In the morning they ran to each other, and started their games afresh. They had no other friends and neither did they need any. The two of them were enough to kick up a ruckus in the entire neighbourhood.

That day, soon after sunrise they waded into the water with their fishing rods. It was late afternoon by the time they came back home with bloodshot eyes, after having stirred up the entire pond and caught fifteen minnows, which were divided equally between them with due ceremony. Parvati's mother gave her a sound thrashing and locked her up in a room. Devdas's fate was not known, because he seldom revealed these facts. But when Parvati was weeping in her room in the afternoon, he did come up to her window and call out softly, 'Paro, Paro.' Parvati probably heard him. But she was so angry that she didn't deign to answer. He spent the rest of the day sitting on a champak tree nearby. It took much coaxing from Dharmadas at dusk to get him to come down.

The next morning Parvati waited eagerly for her Dev-da. But Devdas didn't come. He had gone to a nearby village with his father

to honour an invitation. When Devdas failed to show up, Parvati broodingly walked out of the house all by herself. The previous day, before wading into the pond, Devdas had handed three rupees to her, in case he lost them in the water. They were tied securely in the anchal of Parvati's sari. She whirled her anchal around, whirled herself around and whiled away some time. She couldn't find any of her friends because they were all at school. So she set off for the other end of the neighbourhood. Manorama lived there. Manorama was a little older than Parvati and she went to school too, and they were friends. Parvati hadn't met her for quite a while. Today, since she had the time, she walked into their house and called, 'Mano, are you home?'

Manorama's aunt came out. 'Paro?'

'Yes. Where is Mano, Aunty?'

'She has gone to school. Haven't you gone, my child?'

'I don't go to school. Neither does Dev-da.'

Manorama's aunt laughed and said, 'Oh, that is wonderful. Neither you nor Dev-da goes to school, eh?'

'No. We don't go.'

'Well, that's fine. But Mano has gone to school'

Aunty asked her to wait, but Parvati shook her head and started back. On the way back, near Rasik Pal's shop, she ran into three Vaishnavis—minstrel-women of the Vaishnav sect. They had sandal paste on their foreheads and musical instruments in their hands. They were on their way to seek alms. Parvati called out to them and said, 'O Boshtomis, do you know any songs?'

One of them turned around and said, 'Sure we do, my child.'

'Will you please sing?'

At this all three of them turned around. One of them said, 'We can't sing like this, my dear; you'll have to give us alms. Come, let us go to your home.'

'No. Sing right here.'

'But you'll have to give us money, child.'

Parvati pointed to her anchal and said, 'I have some rupees.'

When they saw the money tied up in her anchal, they moved away from the shop and sat down. Then they began to play and sing. The songs, their meaning, all passed Parvati by; she couldn't have followed them even if she had tried to. But at the sound of the music her heart and soul rushed towards her Dev-da.

The Vaishnavis finished their song and said, 'Well child, give us what you want to give.'

Parvati untied the knot in her sari and handed them the three rupees. Surprised, the three of them stared at her.

One asked, 'Whose money is this, child?'

'Dev-da's.'

'Won't he beat you?'

Parvati thought for a moment. 'No,' she said unsurely.

The Vaishnavis said, 'Bless you, my child.'

Parvati laughed and said, 'It'll be easy to divide it between the three of you, right?'

They nodded happily and said, 'That it will. May Radharani bless your kind heart.' They prayed that this generous girl wouldn't suffer the consequences of her kindness.

That day Parvati got home early. She met Devdas the next morning. He held a kite spool in one hand, but didn't have the kites. He would have to buy them. When Parvati came up to him, he said, 'Paro, give me the money.'

Parvati's face fell. She said, 'I don't have it.'

'What did you do with it?'

'I gave it to the Boshtomis. They sang songs.'

'And you gave them *all* of it?'

'Yes. There *were* only three rupees.'

'Stupid. You shouldn't give away all of it.'

'Oh, but there were three of them. If I didn't give three rupees, how would they split it up between them?'

Devdas grew serious and said, 'If I were you, I'd have given them two rupees.' He used one end of the spool to scratch out the figures on the ground and then said, 'They would have each got a little under eleven annas.'

Parvati thought for a while and then said, 'They don't know their maths as well as you do.'

Devdas had studied his arithmetic with great difficulty and Parvati's comment flattered him. He said, 'That's true.'

Parvati took his hand and said, 'I thought you would beat me, Dev-da.'

Devdas fell from the sky. 'Why would I do that?'

'Those Boshtomis said, you might beat me.'

Devdas happily leaned on her shoulder and said, 'Do I ever beat you when you haven't done something wrong?'

Perhaps according to Devdas this action of Parvati's lay outside his penal code. After all, three rupees did split up quite nicely between three people, especially for women who had never gone to school or studied arithmetic. If they were handed two rupees instead of three, it may indeed have been unfair on them. Devdas took Parvati's hand and began to walk towards the small market to buy some kites. On the way, they hid the spool in a nearby bush.

Chapter 4

One whole year passed in this manner. But things couldn't stay the same forever. Devdas's mother was getting very upset. She called her husband and said, 'Deva is growing into an unlettered bumpkin—please do something.'

Mukherjee-babu pondered over it and said, 'Let him go to Calcutta. He can stay in Nagen's house and finish his studies.' Nagen-babu was Devdas's mother's brother.

Soon everyone had come to know of this decision. Parvati was shocked to hear the news. When she got him alone, she hung onto Devdas's arm and said, 'Dev-da, you are going to Calcutta?'

'Who says that?'

'Uncle said so.'

'Rubbish ... I'll never go.'

'And if he forces you to go?'

'Force?' Devdas made a face at that; it was obvious to Parvati that there wasn't a soul who could force him to do anything. That was exactly what she had wanted to know. Delighted at this turn of events, she hung on his arm again, turned this way and that, gazed on his face and said with a little laugh, 'Just see that you don't go away, Dev-da.'

'Never.'

But he wasn't able to honour this promise. His father, after much scolding and cajoling, managed to send him off to Calcutta, accompanied by Dharmadas. On the day he left, Devdas felt very sad. He didn't feel an ounce of curiosity or excitement about the new place he was to see.

Parvati refused to leave him alone for a second that day. She wept and wept, but no one took any notice. She then refused to speak to Devdas. But he called her and said, 'Listen Paro, I'll be back soon. If they don't let me come, I'll run away.'

A little mollified, Parvati unburdened her tiny heart to him. Then he picked up his portmanteau and with his mother's blessings and her tears glowing fresh on his brow he mounted the buggy and drove away.

Parvati was heartbroken. The tears streamed down her cheeks and her heart was fit to burst from grief. That's how the first few days went by. Then one morning, she woke up to find that she had nothing to do all day. Until then, since the day she had quit school, the entire day used to be spent in getting up to all kinds of mischief with Devdas; she had felt there was so much to do and so little time. But now she had a lot of time and hardly anything to do. Some days she'd wake up and sit down to write a letter. Ten o'clock would roll around and Mother would get irritated. Grandma would say, 'Poor thing, let her write. It's better to do some reading-writing in the morning than to run around all over the place.'

On the days that a letter from Devdas arrived, Parvati would look like she had grasped the moon in her hands. She would sit on the threshold of the staircase and read the letter over and over, all day long. Finally, when a couple of months passed, the frequency

of the letters grew less and less; interest seemed to have waned a little on both sides.

One day Parvati went up to her mother and said, 'Mother, I want to go to school again.'

Mother was quite surprised, 'Why, child?'

Parvati nodded and said, 'Yes, I most certainly want to go.'

'Fine then. When have I ever stopped you from going to school?'

That afternoon Parvati dug out the old and tattered books and the long-forsaken slate and, holding onto the maid's hand, she walked to school. She went up to her old place and took her seat, calmly and patiently. The maid said, 'Master, don't beat her up again. She has come back of her own free will. Let her study when she wants to and let her go when she wants to go.'

The teacher said to himself, 'As you wish.' He said aloud, 'Fine by me.' It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her why they didn't send Parvati to Calcutta as well. But he pulled himself up. Parvati saw that the class monitor, Bhulo, sat in his old place on the bench. For a moment she nearly giggled. But then her eyes filled with tears. She felt very angry with Bhulo. He seemed to be the sole culprit behind Devdas's leaving home.

Several months passed. Devdas came back home after a long spell. Parvati ran out excitedly to meet him. They talked a lot. She didn't have much to say, or even if she did, she couldn't say much. But Devdas talked a great deal. Most of it was about Calcutta. Then the summer holidays came to an end. Devdas went back to Calcutta. This time the tears streamed, but their flow seemed weaker than before.

In this manner four years went by. In these few years Devdas had changed so much that it made Parvati shed a few tears in

private. The rustic traits in Devdas had vanished completely with his sojourn in Calcutta. Now he sported foreign shoes, bright clothes, a walking stick, gold buttons, a watch—without these accessories he felt bereft. He never felt like taking a walk by the river anymore; instead he would rather take his gun and go hunting. Instead of the tiny minnows, he now wanted to hook the big fish. That wasn't all. He talked of politics, meetings, organizations, cricket, football and so much more. Woe betide Paro and their village, Talshonapur. Sometimes the odd memory of his childhood drifted into his mind all right, but the excitement of other things soon drove those thoughts from his head.

Yet another summer vacation came along. The previous year Devdas had gone abroad for his vacation. This year both his parents wrote to him, asking him to come home. Quite unwillingly he packed his bags and headed for his village. The day he arrived, he wasn't feeling too well. So he couldn't go out. The next day he went to Parvati's house and called out, 'Aunty'

Parvati's mother welcomed him in and said, 'Come in, son.'

He spent some time talking to her and then asked, 'Aunty, where is Paro?'

'Probably upstairs.'

Devdas went upstairs and found Parvati lighting the evening lamp; he called, 'Paro.'

She was startled at first. Then she touched his feet respectfully and stood aside.

'What's all this, Paro?'

There was no need for words. So she was silent. Devdas felt shy too. He said, 'I'll be off then; it's nearly dark outside. I'm not too well either.' He walked away.

Chapter 5

According to Grandma, Parvati had just turned thirteen. It was the age when the teenaged body suddenly bloomed and came to life. The family suddenly woke up one day to the fact that their little girl was all grown up. Now there was a rush to get her married. This had been the topic of discussion in the Chakravarty household for the last few days. Mother was very sad; she kept telling her husband, 'True, we can't hold on to Paro any longer.'

They were not wealthy. But fortunately the girl was very attractive. If beauty was worth anything in this world, Parvati wouldn't cause them a day's concern. Another fact needs to be mentioned. Till that time, in their household, only sons' weddings were a cause for worry, not that of a daughter. The custom was to take a bride-price for a girl's marriage and to give it for a boy's marriage. Even Nilkantha-babu's father had taken a bride-price for his daughter's marriage. But Nilkantha-babu abhorred this practice. He had no intention of selling Parvati and making money on the transaction.

Parvati's mother was aware of this. So she often rushed her husband about their daughter's marriage. Until then, Parvati's mother had indulged in a distant fantasy that she could somehow marry her daughter off to Devdas. It didn't seem like such an impossible idea after all. She had hoped that a broad hint dropped

gently might help. Perhaps that was why Parvati's grandma tried to broach the subject to Devdas's mother, saying, 'Your Devdas and my Paro—they are so close to each other; it's a rare sight, really.'

Devdas's mother said, 'And why not, Aunt? They've grown up together like a brother and sister.'

'Yes, yes, that's why I feel—just look at the way she cried and cried when Devdas went off to Calcutta. And she was barely eight years old. One letter from Devdas and her day would be made. We have known all along, you see.'

Devdas's mother understood all the veiled hints. She smiled to herself. There was more pathos than derision in that smile. She had seen it all too, and she also loved Parvati. But the Chakravartys' was a trading household. And they lived right next door. Oh shame.

She said, 'You know Aunt, Devdas's father is very definite about not getting him married at this age, when he is still studying. He has always said to me, it was a big mistake getting my eldest son, Dwijodas, married at an early age. He didn't get to complete his education.'

Parvati's grandma was very embarrassed. But she still went on, 'That may be so, my child. But you know, Paro—God bless her—has shot up and she's really filling out and so, if Narayan has no objection ...'

Devdas's mother stopped her and said, 'No Aunt. I can't bring myself to say this to him. If I propose a marriage for Devdas at this time, he'd be very upset.'

The matter seemed to end there. But women can never keep secrets. At dinnertime Devdas's mother brought up the subject before her husband. 'Today Paro's grandma was talking about getting her married.'

Mukherjee-babu looked up. 'Yes, she seems to have grown a lot. It would be sensible to get her married quickly.'

'That's why she broached it today. She said if Devdas—'

He frowned and asked, 'What did you say?'

'What could I say? The two of them are very close. But I can't bring home a bride from a trading family like theirs. And they are our neighbours too. Shame.'

Mukherjee-babu was happy. He said, 'Exactly. We can't become a laughing stock. Don't pay any attention to all this talk.'

His wife smiled wryly, 'No, I won't. But you don't forget about it either.'

Gravely her husband brought the morsel to his mouth and said, 'If I were to do that, this huge zamindari would have vanished into thin air long ago.'

God would keep his zamindari intact for many years to come. But let us take a look at Parvati's misery. When talk about this proposal and its rejection reached Nilkantha-babu he called his mother and scolded her, 'Mother, why did you have to go and do this?'

Grandma was silent.

Nilkantha-babu continued, 'We don't have to beg people to get our daughter married. In fact it's the other way round. My daughter isn't bad looking. I tell you—within this week I shall fix up her marriage. It's not a problem at all.'

But it was the end of the world for Parvati. From her childhood she was sure that she had some claims on her Dev-da. No one had handed those rights to her on a platter. At first it wasn't even very clear to her that she thought of Devdas in this way. But over the years her mind had staked its claim so gently and so surely, that

though she may not have felt its presence tangibly until then, at all this talk of losing him, a storm broke loose in her heart.

But the same couldn't be said of Devdas. He had enjoyed all his rights over Parvati as a child. But once he went to Calcutta and discovered other interests and pleasures, he had sort of let go of her. He had no idea that Parvati, in her mundane, rustic existence, bore his face in her heart day in and day out.

Parvati felt that the one person who had always seemed to be hers and hers alone, who had always indulged her every wish, was hardly likely to slip away the minute her childhood ended and youth arrived. At the time who gave marriage a thought? Who knew that the ties of childhood could never be permanent unless they were renewed by marriage vows? The news that marriage between them was impossible crashed within her heart and seemed to tear away at every wish, every desire she had ever nurtured there.

But Devdas had his homework in the mornings and the afternoons were too hot; he could only stroll around in the evenings. So he often dressed up, took his walking stick and walked out to the meadows. Parvati wiped her eyes and gazed on him from her window. Thoughts clamoured in her head. She knew they had both grown up and after the prolonged separation, they both felt shy of each other. The other day Devdas had just walked off, too shy to even speak to her properly.

Devdas had similar thoughts. Sometimes he wanted to talk to Parvati, to take a good look at her. But immediately he'd think, 'How would that look?'

Here, in the village, the hustle-bustle of Calcutta, the excitement, the entertainment were all missing and so he was often

beset by thoughts of his childhood. That Paro who had been his playmate now looked like this—a grown woman. Parvati too often thought of the fact that Dev-da was now Devdas-babu. These days he seldom went to their house. Sometimes, after dusk, he'd stand in the courtyard and call out, 'Aunty, what's up?'

Aunty would say, 'Come in, son.'

Immediately he would say, 'Oh no Aunty, not now. I'm going for a walk.' Sometimes Parvati would be upstairs and some days she'd be right before him. As he talked to Aunty, she would slowly move away. At night the lamp in Devdas's room would be lit. Parvati would spend many an hour gazing at that lighted window—but nothing else was seen.

Parvati was a proud girl. She didn't want anyone to get wind of the kind of hell she was going through. Besides, what was the point? She wouldn't be able to take their pity and as for the criticism—she was better off without it.

Manorama had got married the previous year. But she still hadn't gone to her husband's home. So she came round sometimes. Earlier the two friends often discussed marriage and the like. The topic still came up sometimes, but Parvati never joined in. She kept silent or changed the subject.

Parvati's father had gone to fix a match for her. He came back one night, having done the deed. The groom was none other than Bhuvan Chowdhury, the zamindar of Hatipota village, some twenty miles away in the Burdwan district. Apparently he was very well off and below forty years in age. He had lost his wife the year before—hence the desire to marry again. The news wasn't welcomed by everyone in the house. In fact most people were unhappy. But the fact remained

that nearly two to three thousand rupees was to come from Bhuvan Chowdhury, one way or another, and so the women were silent.

One afternoon as Devdas sat down to lunch, his mother came and sat beside him and said, 'So, Paro is getting married.'

Devdas looked up and asked, 'When?'

'This month. Yesterday they came and saw the bride. The groom came himself.'

Devdas was a little surprised, 'But I don't even know anything, Mother.'

'How would you know? The groom is a widower—quite old. But I believe he is well to do; Paro will live a good life.'

Devdas looked down and continued with his meal. His mother went on, 'They had wanted to fix her marriage in this household.'

Devdas looked up, 'And?'

Mother laughed, 'Oh no, that's not possible. They are lower in status, a trading family and our immediate neighbours to boot—shame.' Mother wrinkled her nose. Devdas watched her in silence.

After a few minutes' pause, Mother spoke again, 'I did speak about it to your father.'

"What did he say?'

"What *could he* say? He won't be able to drag the family name in the mud—that's what he told me.'

Devdas didn't say another word.

That afternoon Manorama and Parvati were having a chat. Parvati's eyes were full of tears and Manorama seemed to have just wiped them away. The latter asked, 'So, what are your options?'

Parvati wiped her eyes again and said, 'What options? Was your husband *your* choice?'

'That was different. He may not have been my choice, but neither did I dislike him; so I didn't suffer at all. But you seem to have brought your misfortune upon yourself.'

Parvati didn't answer. She just mused in silence.

Manorama did some thinking of her own and then asked, 'Hey Paro, how old is the groom?'

'Whose groom?'

'Yours.'

Parvati did some calculations and said, 'Perhaps nineteen.'

Manorama was quite taken aback. She said, 'But... I heard he is almost forty.'

This time Parvati laughed a little. She said, 'Mano-didi, I really don't know how many grooms are nearly forty. But I do know that *my* groom is around twenty years old.'

Manorama gazed at her face and asked, 'What's his name?'

Parvati laughed again, 'Don't you know?'

'How would I know?'

'You don't? Fine, then, let me tell you,' with a slight smile she sobered up quickly, brought her lips to Manorama's ears and whispered, 'Don't you know—Sri Devdas—'

At first Manorama was startled. Then she pushed her away and said, 'Don't make fun of me. Say it now, while you are not married to him and can still take your husband's name—'

'But I just said it.'

Manorama was upset, 'If he really is called Devdas, then why are you crying your heart out?'

Suddenly the light went out of Parvati's eyes. She thought for a while and said, 'True. I shouldn't cry anymore.'

'Paro?'

'What is it?'

'Why don't you tell me everything, little sister? I can't understand anything.'

Parvati said, 'But I just told you everything.'

'But I couldn't understand a word of it.'

'And you wouldn't ever understand.' Parvati turned away.

Manorama felt Parvati was hiding things, she had no intention of opening her heart to her. She felt very hurt and said, 'Paro, if something makes you sad, let me share it with you. All I want is that you be happy. If you have some secrets that you don't want to share with me, that's okay. But please don't make fun of me.'

Parvati was also upset. She said, 'I haven't made fun of you, didi. I have told you all that *I* know. I know that my husband's name is Devdas and he is nineteen or twenty years old—that's what I have told you.'

'But I just heard that your marriage has been fixed elsewhere?'

'What is fixed? For whom? Obviously Grandma won't be getting married now. If anyone does get married it'll be me and I haven't heard any such news.'

So Manorama made as if to tell Parvati all that she had heard. Parvati stopped her and said, 'Oh *that*—I have heard all that.'

'So then? Has Devdas—'

'Has he what?'

Manorama hid a smile and asked, 'So are you planning to elope? Have you made all the arrangements in secret?'

'Nothing has been arranged so far.'

Manorama was wounded, 'I really don't understand what you are saying, Paro.'

Parvati said, 'So, I'll ask Dev-da and explain it all to you, will I?'

'What will you ask him? Whether he'll marry you or not?'

Parvati nodded her head. 'Yes.'

Manorama could hardly speak, so bewildered was she. 'What is this, Paro? You'll be able to ask him this yourself?'

'What's wrong with that?'

Manorama was still stunned. 'I can't believe it. You yourself?'

'Of course, I, myself. Who else will put this question to him?'

'Won't you be ashamed?'

'No. Did I feel ashamed saving it to you?'

'I am a girl, your friend—but he is a *man*, Paro.'

Parvati laughed, 'You are a friend, you are my near one... and is he so very distant? If I can say something to you, can't I say it to him?'

Manorama stared at her in stunned surprise.

Parvati smiled at her, 'Mano-didi, you wear the sindoor in your hair, but you don't know what a husband is. If he wasn't my husband, beyond all my shame and embarrassment, I wouldn't be in this state today. Besides didi, when someone is ready to kill herself, does she consider if the poison is bitter or sweet? I am not ashamed of him.'

Manorama looked at her face. A little later she said, 'What will you say to him? Please let me be at your feet?'

Parvati nodded her head and said, 'That is exactly what I'll say, didi.'

'And if he refuses?'

Parvati was quiet for a long time and then she said, 'I don't know what I'll do then.'

As she walked home, Manorama thought, 'Amazing grit. That is some courage. I would rather die than speak like that.'

This was the truth. Parvati was right—there were women like Manorama who wore their sindoor and their iron bangles, marks of a marriage, to no real purpose.

Chapter 6

It was almost one o'clock at night. A faint moonshine clung to the sky. Parvati wrapped herself in swathes of bedsheets and came down the stairs very softly. She looked around—not a soul was awake. She opened the door and walked into the street quietly. On the village roads there wasn't a soul around, nothing stirred and she had hardly a chance of running into someone. She came and stood before the gate of the zamindar's house. On the threshold the old guard, Krishan Singh, lay on his charpoy reading the *Ramayan*. He spotted Parvati and without looking up he asked, 'Who is that?'

'It's me.'

The guard could tell it was a woman. He thought it was a maid and he went back to reading his book. Parvati went on her way. It was summer and some servants were lying in the courtyard. Some were asleep and some were half awake. In that state even if they saw her, they came to the same conclusion as the guard and didn't say anything. With nothing to stop her, Parvati entered the house and took the stairs. She knew each room, every corridor of this house. She had no problems finding Devdas's room. The door was open and a lamp burned within. Parvati entered the room and found Devdas fast asleep. In his hands a book lay open. It looked

as if he had just fallen asleep. She stoked the lamp and sat down at his feet. The wall clock ticked away noisily. Besides that, all else was silent, fast asleep.

Parvati touched Devdas's feet and softly called, 'Dev-da.'

Devdas heard someone calling him in his sleep. He didn't open his eyes, but he answered, 'Hmm?'

'O Dev-da.'

This time Devdas rubbed his eyes and sat up straight. Parvati's face was uncovered and the lamp burned brightly; he had no trouble recognizing her. But at first he couldn't believe his eyes. Then he said, 'Who is that—Paro, is that you?'

'Yes, it's me.'

Devdas glanced at the clock. His surprise knew no bounds, 'At this time of night?'

Parvati didn't answer. She just sat with her head bent low.

Devdas asked, 'Have you come here all alone, so late in the night?'

Parvati said, 'Yes.'

Devdas shuddered with apprehension, 'Weren't you scared?'

Parvati smiled shortly and replied, 'I have never really been afraid of ghosts.'

'Maybe not ghosts, but you should certainly fear people. Why are you here?'

'Right now, I don't fear people either,' Parvati thought to herself.

'How did you come inside? Has someone seen you?'

'The guard saw me.'

Devdas's eyes widened, 'The guard? Anyone else?'

'The servants are sleeping outside. Some of them may have seen me too.'

Devdas jumped out of bed and shut the door. 'Did someone recognize you?'

Parvati showed the least concern as she said, 'They all know by sight. Perhaps some of them did.'

'What? Why did you do this, Paro?'

Parvati thought, 'How would you know that?' But she didn't say a word and just sat there, a little embarrassed.

'So late . . . shame on you. How will you face everyone tomorrow?'

Parvati kept her head bent low as she replied, 'I have the strength for that.'

Devdas wasn't angry, but he was very upset as he said, 'Oh, the shame of it—are you still a child? Didn't you feel any shame coming here like this?'

Parvati shook her head and said, 'No.'

'Tomorrow won't you feel very ashamed?'

At this question Parvati shot him a sharp yet sorrowful glance and then replied quite easily, 'I would have felt ashamed if I wasn't sure that you would do everything to shield me from it.'

Devdas was stunned. 'I? But I would be equally ashamed.'

Parvati replied in the same unwavering tone as before, 'You? But how does it affect you, Dev-da?' After a slight pause, she said, 'You are a man. Sooner or later they'd all forget about your disgrace; very soon no one would care to remember when and how the unfortunate Parvati had cast away her shame and come to rest her head at your feet.'

'What is this, Paro?'

'And I—'

As in a trance, Devdas said, 'You what, Paro?'

'If you speak of my disgrace, I have none. If I am disgraced because I came to you in secret, it won't leave the slightest mark on me.'

'Paro—are you crying?'

'Dev-da, there's so much water in the river—will it not be enough to drown my disgrace?'

Suddenly Devdas grasped her hands. 'Parvati.'

Parvati laid her head at his feet and spoke tearfully, 'Let me be here, Dev-da.'

Then both of them fell silent. A handful of teardrops rolled off Devdas's feet and stained the unsoiled bed.

Much later, Devdas raised her face and said, 'Paro, am I your only salvation?'

Parvati was silent. She laid her head on his feet again. In the silent room her tearful sighs heaved and shuddered. The clock struck two. Devdas called out, 'Paro.'

Parvati spoke through her tears, 'What is it?'

'You must know that my parents are dead against this?'

Parvati nodded—she knew.

She didn't say a word more. After what seemed like an eternity, Devdas heaved a sigh and said, 'So then, why?'

Parvati clung on to his feet the way a drowning man clings to a straw and refuses to let go, at all costs. She looked at his face and said, 'I don't want to know anything, Dev-da.'

'Paro, should I go against my parents?'

'Why not?'

'Where would you live?'

Parvati sobbed, 'At your feet—'

They sat together silently. The clock struck four. It was a summer night and very soon the dawn would streak the sky pink, Devdas gripped her hands and said, 'Come, I will take you home—'

'You'll come with me?'

'Why not? If someone sees us and there's a scandal, there may be a way out for us yet.'

'Let's go.'

The two of them walked out of the room softly.

Chapter 7

The next day Devdas had a short conversation with his father.

Father said, 'You'll never give me a moment's peace till the day I die. So I shouldn't be surprised to hear you talk like this.'

Devdas sat there, silent and sheepish.

Father said, 'I won't be a part of all this. You and your mother can do whatever you like.'

Devdas's mother heard this and wailed, 'Oh God, I had to live to see this day.'

The same day Devdas packed his bags and left for Calcutta.

When Parvati heard this, a stony smile played on her already rigid face. She did not say a word. No one had spotted them the previous night and she hadn't told anyone. But Manorama came and asked her, 'Paro, I hear Devdas has left?'

'Yes.'

'So, what will he do about you?'

Parvati didn't know the answer to that herself. She had thought of nothing else for the last few days. But she simply couldn't figure out how hopeful she should be, or how hopeless. But it's true that in such circumstances, when we swing between hope and fear and feel so thoroughly lost and confused, we tend to lean more towards hope. Willy-nilly, we look towards the positive with expectation in

our eyes. In her present state Parvati hoped that the previous night and all that it held would not go in vain. If it did, she had no idea what she would do. So she thought, Dev-da would return, he'd call her and say, 'Paro, as long as there is breath left in me, I cannot see you marrying someone else.'

But a few days later Parvati received the following letter:

Parvati,

I have thought of you for the last two days. Neither Father nor Mother wants us to get married. If I want to make you happy, I'd have to inflict a wound on them that is beyond my capacity. Besides, how would we even go about doing this against their wish? I do not know when I will ever write to you again. So I must explain everything in this letter. Your family as you know is not high-born. Mother refuses to seek an alliance with a trading family and she thinks an alliance with one's neighbours is quite indecent. As for Father ... well, you know all about that.

The other night is causing me a lot of pain—I know what it takes to drive a proud soul like you to that kind of drastic action.

Another thing: I had never ever felt that I love you tremendously—even today, I cannot feel any deep well of sorrow in my heart for you. I just feel bad that you will suffer on my account. Try to forget me... I pray that you succeed.

Devdas

Until Devdas dropped the letter in the post-box, he was in one frame of mind. But the minute it left his hands, he began to feel

something else altogether. Once the arrow had shot out of the bow, he began to gaze at it with deep consternation. An indecipherable fear was beginning to clutch at his heart slowly but surely.

How would this arrow he had dispatched go and hit her, he thought. Would it hurt a lot? Would she survive? As he walked back from the post office, he thought only of the way she had placed her head on his feet and wept that night. Had he done the right thing? Above all else he thought, why did his parents object to her when her birth wasn't her fault in any way? With age and an understanding of life which he had gained from his stay at Calcutta Devdas had come to believe that it was wrong to destroy an individual's life in order to preserve a status that was in any case a product of narrow-minded thought. If Paro were to give up her life, if she rushed to the riverside with that intent, wouldn't it be a thorn in his, Devdas's, conscience for all time to come?

He came back to his room. These days he lived in a mess, a shared accommodation. He had left his uncle's place a while ago—it didn't suit him at all. In the room next to Devdas's, a youth called Chunilal had been staying for the last nine years. His prolonged sojourn at Calcutta was given to passing his BA exam—he hadn't succeeded so far and so he was still in the mess. Chunilal was out for the evening; he'd come back only at the crack of dawn. There was no one else in the house. The maid came and lit the lamps. Devdas shut the door and lay down.

One by one, all the inhabitants of the mess began to come back. At dinnertime they all called Devdas, but he didn't get up. Chunilal never came back home at night and this day was no exception. It was nearly one in the night now. Devdas was the only soul awake in the house.

Chunilal stepped into the house, stopped in front of Devdas's door and noticed that although the door was shut, the lamp was burning within. He called out, 'Devdas, are you awake?'

Devdas replied from inside, 'I am. How come you've returned so early?'

Chunilal smiled a little and said, 'Yes, I'm not feeling too well,' and he walked away. He came back in a short while and said, 'Devdas, could you open the door?'

'I can, but why?'

'Do you have any tobacco?'

'I do.' Devdas opened the door. Chunilal began to fill up his hookah as he said, 'Why are you up still?'

'Can you sleep every single night?'

'Can't you?' Chunilal was a little sarcastic. 'And here I thought good boys like you have never ever looked midnight in the face. This is new to me.'

Devdas was silent. Chunilal smoked his hookah peacefully and spoke, 'Devdas, ever since you've come back from home, you don't seem too well. You look pretty upset.'

Devdas was a little preoccupied. He didn't answer.

'You're not too happy, are you?'

Suddenly Devdas sat up on his bed. He looked at Chunilal eagerly and asked, 'Tell me, Chuni, are you never upset?'

Chunilal laughed at that. 'Never.'

'Have you never suffered in your whole life?'

'Why do you ask that?'

'I just want to know.'

'Let's leave that for another day.'

Devdas said, 'Chuni, where do you spend your nights?'

Chunilal smiled softly. 'Don't you know that?' he said.

'I do, but not exactly.'

Chunilal's face lit up with enthusiasm. Over the years he had even lost the sensibility that such discussions, if nothing else, might contain an element of shame. He shut his eyes in ecstasy and said, 'Devdas, if you really want to know, you'll have to see for yourself. Will you come with me tomorrow?'

Devdas thought about this. Then he said, 'I've heard the place you go to is full of fun and mirth and you never ever feel sad there. Is that the truth?'

'The absolute and unvarnished truth.'

'If that is so, then please take me there—I'll come with you.'

The following day Chunilal came into Devdas's room a little before dusk and found him packing his case feverishly. Surprised, Chunilal asked him, 'Hey, aren't you going?'

Devdas spoke without looking around, 'Of course I'm going.'

'Then what is all this?'

'Getting ready to go.'

Chunilal laughed and thought, 'Not bad.' He said aloud, 'Are you going to take all your things there?'

'Where else will I leave it all?'

Chunilal was puzzled. 'Where do I leave my things? They stay right here in the room.'

Devdas seemed to wake up suddenly. He looked up shamefacedly and said, 'Oh no—Chuni, I am going home today.'

'What? When will you come back?'

Devdas shook his head. 'I will not come back.'

Chunilal stared at him in amazement. Devdas continued, 'Take this money; pay off all my debts with this. If there is any left over, feel free to give it to the maids and servants of the house. I will not come back to Calcutta ever again.'

To himself he muttered, 'I have lost a lot, too much, by coming to Calcutta.'

Today he could see through the mist that had settled over his eyes in the first rush of youth. He found himself gazing back at his childhood—those half-forgotten, often-scoffed-at days in the village suddenly seemed more precious, much dearer than all the chiselled sophistication of Calcutta. He looked at Chunilal and said, 'Chuni, education, learning, knowledge, success—all they achieve is a false feeling of happiness; however you look at it, they are only meant to pander to your own happiness ...'

Chunilal stopped him and exclaimed, 'So, you aren't going to study any more?'

'No. I have lost a lot because of my studies. Had I known before that I would only go so far in my studies, I would never have come to Calcutta.'

'What is the matter with you?'

Devdas gave this some thought. Then he said, 'I will tell you everything if we ever meet again.'

It was almost nine o'clock at night. Everyone, including Chunilal, looked on in amazement as Devdas loaded all his belongings onto the buggy and left the mess for good. Once he was gone, Chunilal walked back in and exclaimed angrily, 'You never can tell with these wet-behind-the-ears sorts!'

Chapter 8

It is the custom of the wise and cautious not to pronounce judgement on anything hastily, or to jump to conclusions without considering the full implications of the matter. But there are human beings who are the exact opposite. They do not have the patience to reflect over anything or follow a matter through to its logical end. On the spur of the moment they decide that a thing is either good or bad. They make faith do the work of thorough soul searching. It isn't that such people aren't cut out for this world—in fact they often work out very well. If luck is with them, they can often be found at the pinnacle of success. But if luck doesn't favour them, they can be found in the deepest dregs of misery, wallowing in its murky depths, unable to get up, to rise above their circumstances. There they lie like lifeless, inanimate objects. Devdas belonged to this class of men.

The next morning he was back home. Mother was surprised to see him. 'Deva, has the college closed down again?' she asked.

Devdas threw an absent-minded 'Hmmm' at her and walked away. He dealt with his father's queries with a similar brush-off. Father, quite puzzled, questioned his wife in turn. She used her common sense and replied, 'They must have closed again since it is too hot.'

Devdas spent the next couple of days in restless frustration. He wasn't able to have what he wanted—a few minutes alone with Parvati. Two days later, Parvati's mother bumped into him and she said, 'Now that you're here, child, stay for Paro's wedding.'

Devdas said, 'All right.'

In the afternoon, after lunch, Parvati went to the river every day to fetch water. That day, too, she was there with the brass pot hitched on her waist. She found Devdas sitting under a berry tree, fishing rod in hand.

For a moment Parvati considered going back. Then she thought she would fill the pitcher quietly and slip away. But in her nervousness, she could do neither. As she placed the pot on the stone steps, it must have made a sound. Devdas quickly looked up. He waved to her and called, 'Paro, come here.'

Slowly, Parvati went and stood beside him. Devdas looked up for an instant. Then he went back to staring into space, at the unbroken monotony of the flowing river, for several seconds.

Parvati said, 'Dev-da, do you want to talk to me?'

Devdas spoke without looking around, 'Hmmm. Sit.'

Parvati didn't sit. She stood there, looking down. But when there were no words spoken for a long time, she began to inch back to the steps slowly. Devdas looked up, just once. Then he turned back to the river and said, 'Listen.'

Parvati came back to him. But when Devdas still couldn't bring himself to say anything, she retraced her steps again. Devdas sat there, seemingly turned to stone. A little later he turned to find Parvati ready to go back, her pot now filled. He wound up his fishing rod and came and stood by the steps and said, 'I have come.'

Parvati merely set the pot down again; she didn't say a word.

'I have come back, Paro.'

Parvati was silent for a long time. Finally she asked, very softly, 'Why?'

'You asked me to come back, don't you remember?'

'No.'

'What is this, Paro? Don't you remember the other night?'

'I do. But all that is pointless now, isn't it?'

Her voice was calm, but her tone rude. The significance escaped Devdas. He said, 'Please forgive me, Paro; I didn't know then.'

'Oh, please be quiet. I don't even want to hear all this.'

'I will get my parents to agree, by hook or by crook. You just...'

Parvati shot him a fierce glance and said, 'You have parents, and I don't? Their consent is not important?'

Devdas was disconcerted. 'Of course it is, Paro, but they have already given it—you just—'

'How do you know they have given their consent? They haven't.'

Devdas made a vain attempt to smile, 'Oh no, they have no objections, I know that. Only you must—'

Parvati broke into his words shrilly, 'I must—with you? For shame!'

Devdas's eyes burned with retribution as he turned on her and said, 'Paro, have you forgotten me?'

At first Parvati was a little startled. But she collected herself immediately and spoke calmly but coldly. 'No. How could I? I've known you since childhood and my earliest memories are of fearing you ... So, have you come to threaten me once again? But what makes you think—have *you* forgotten me?' She raised fearless eyes at him and stood up straight.

Devdas was struck speechless. Slowly, he spoke, 'You have always feared me—and nothing else?'

Parvati's voice was firm, 'No, nothing else.'

'Is that the truth?'

'Yes, it is. I have no faith in you. The man I am going to—he is wealthy, wise—calm and patient. He is a religious man. My parents want the best for me; so they would never have me fall into the hands of someone as ruthless, reckless and unwise as you. Now, please let me go.'

Devdas hesitated for a fraction of a second; he even made as if to let her pass. But the next instant he stood his ground firmly and said, 'Such arrogance.'

Parvati said, 'And why not? If you can be arrogant, so can I. You may be good looking, but you have no virtues—I have both virtues and good looks. Your family may be wealthy, but my father is no beggar. Besides, in a few days I will be richer than you.'

Devdas was stunned into silence.

Parvati continued, 'You must be thinking that you can do me a lot of harm; well, I know that you can do me *some* if not a lot of harm. Fine—go ahead. But do let me go now.'

Devdas was dumbfounded. He asked, 'How would I harm you?'

Instantly Parvati replied, 'By dishonouring my name. Well, go ahead and do your worst!'

Devdas looked at her with eyes full of hurt. All he could say was, 'You think I would drag your name in the mud?'

Parvati smiled a crooked smile laced with bitterness. She said, 'Go on, give me a bad name; go ahead and tell everyone that I went to you all alone that night. I'm sure it'll give you a lot of satisfaction.' Her proud mouth quivered in pain.

Devdas felt a volcano of wrath and humiliation erupt within him. He muttered to himself, 'So you think I would give you a bad name and get satisfaction out of it?'

The next moment he had turned the fishing rod around; holding the thick end up, he said, 'You know Paro, so much beauty is not right for a person to have. It only makes you vain.' He lowered his voice and continued, 'Isn't it obvious—the moon is marked because it is so beautiful; the black bee hovers over the pristine beauty of the lotus. Come, let me mar your face and spoil its perfection.'

Devdas was not in his senses. He held the fishing rod firmly, swung it around and aimed a glancing blow at Parvati's brow. Immediately, her face was awash with blood. She had a jagged gash that started at the hairline and came down to her left eyebrow. She crumpled to the ground and screamed, 'Dev-da, how could you do this!'

Devdas was snapping his fishing rod into tiny bits and throwing the pieces into the river; the bits of bamboo floated on the water. He replied with studied calm, 'It's not much—just a gash, that's all.'

Parvati wailed with renewed misery, 'Oh God, Dev-da!'

Devdas tore off strips from his thin cotton shirt, soaked them in the water and began to bandage her head as he said, 'Why are you scared, Paro? This wound will heal soon—just the mark will remain. If anyone ever asks, lie to them; or you could always tell them the truth and reveal your own shame.'

'Oh no, oh God—'

"For shame, Paro—do be quiet. I have merely left a mark for you to remember our last meeting. You *will* glance at that pretty

face in the mirror every now and then, won't you?' He seemed ready to leave, not needing an answer.

Parvati wept miserably, 'Oh Dev-da—'

Devdas came back; a tear glistened in a corner of his eye. 'What is it, Paro?'

'Please don't tell anyone.'

Instantly, Devdas leaned forward, brushed her hair with his lips and said, 'How can I—you are no stranger to me, Paro. Don't you remember, in our childhood, how often I boxed your ears when you pulled a prank?'

'Dev-da, please forgive me.'

'You don't even have to ask. Paro, have you really forgotten me? When was I ever mad at you for long? When did I not forgive you?'

'Dev-da—'

'Paro, you know I am not good with words. Neither do I look before I leap. I just leap and think later.' Devdas placed his hand on her head. 'You have chosen wisely. You would not have found happiness with me. But one thing, your Dev-da would have held heaven in his left hand if you had been with him.'

They heard voices headed their way around the bend. Parvati slowly walked down the steps into the water. Devdas walked away.

When Parvati returned home, it was evening. Grandma spoke to her without looking up, 'Paro, child, did you dig up the pond first and then fetch the water?' But then her words died on her lips. She had looked at Parvati's face. A scream rose to her lips, 'Oh my God, how did this happen?'

The wound was still bleeding and the strips of cloth were dripping blood. Grandma cried, 'Oh God, Paro, and you are about to be married ...!'

Parvati calmly set the pot down. Mother came running at the commotion. Seeing Parvati, she wailed, 'Oh dear, Paro, how did this happen?'

Quite coolly, Paro replied, 'I slipped and fell on the steps. The bricks hit my head and I cut myself.'

They all began to ply her with care and concern. Devdas was right—it wasn't a deep gash. It dried up in a week.

Nearly ten more days passed. Then one evening the zamindar of Hatipota village, Sri Bhuvanmohan Chowdhury, arrived at the Chakravartys' house dressed in the groom's finery. It was a simple ceremony. Bhuvan-babu wasn't an idiot—he wasn't going to make a spectacle of himself in his second marriage.

The groom was well above forty, fair, plump and stodgily built with a salt-and-pepper moustache and a rapidly receding hairline. Some people laughed in their sleeves, while others preferred to stay silent. A trifle apologetically, Bhuvan-babu took his place at the wedding mandap. The women refrained from their usual teasing banter. The groom's grave visage did not exactly make for mirth. When the moment came for the bride and the groom to set eyes upon each other for the first time, Parvati stared at Bhuvan-babu fixedly, a tiny smile playing on her lips. Bhuvan-babu looked down with overt modesty. The neighbourhood women burst into giggles.

Nilkantha-babu, Parvati's father, was running around supervising everything. He was a little out of his element with this middle-aged son-in-law he had acquired. Narayan Mukherjee, Devdas's father, was playing host for the day. A seasoned man, he didn't let a single hitch come up in the whole ceremony. The happy event concluded in peace and harmony.

The next morning Bhuvan-babu handed over a box of ornaments to Nilkantha-babu. Within minutes they were glittering and sparkling on Parvati. The sight made her mother quietly wipe her eyes with the end of her sari. The zamindar's wife stood nearby. She reproached her lovingly, 'Don't spoil the day with tears, sister.'

A little after dark Manorama took Parvati aside into a room and blessed her, saying, 'It is all for the better. Just see if you're not as happy as anyone can be in the years to come.'

Parvati smiled and said, 'Of course I will be happy. I met my ruin for a few minutes yesterday.'

'What are you saying?'

'Time will reveal all.'

Manorama changed the subject and said, 'I wish I could drag Devdas here and show him this beautiful vision.'

Parvati seemed to come out of a trance. 'Can you?' she said. 'Isn't it possible to bring him here, just once?'

Her tone sent a chill down Manorama's spine. 'Why, Paro?'

Parvati twirled the bracelet on her wrist and said, 'I would touch his feet for the last time, before I leave.'

Manorama pulled her into her arms and the two girls had a good cry. Dusk had fallen. Grandma pushed at the door from outside and shouted, 'Oh Paro, oh Mano, come on outside, you two.'

That night Parvati left for her husband's house.

Chapter 9

And Devdas? He spent the night on a bench in Eden Gardens in Calcutta. He didn't feel terribly sad or tortured. But his chest grew heavy with a sense of cold foreboding: it was as if a part of his body had suddenly succumbed to paralysis, and when he found it unresponsive, his bemused mind refused to accept the fact that the familiar limb of his would no longer answer his call. Gradually comprehension dawned—it was no longer his to call upon. As the night wore on, the realization dawned on Devdas that the very meaning of his life had suddenly fallen, paralysed, by the wayside, and left him bereft for all times to come. No amount of ranting and raving would bring it back. It would be wrong to even recall it as a right he once had.

Dawn was creeping in on him slowly. Devdas stood up and thought, 'Where to go?'

Suddenly he remembered the mess—Chunilal lived there. Devdas began to walk. On the way he tottered a few times, stumbled and fell. His hand bled—he even keeled over and lurched on to someone who called him a drunkard and pushed him away. It took him a whole day's wandering before he finally came and stood at the door of the mess where he once lived. Chunilal was all dressed up and on his way out. 'Hello there, isn't it Devdas?' he said, recognizing him.

Devdas looked at him mutely.

'When did you arrive? You look tired, haven't you eaten? Hey, hold on, what—' Devdas, feeling dizzy, was about to squat on the road when Chunilal took his hand and dragged him inside. He sat him down on his own bed, calmed him a little and asked, 'What is the matter with you?'

'I came into town last night.'

'Last night? So where were you all day? And what about all night?'

'At Eden Gardens.'

'Are you crazy? Tell me what has happened.'

'What is the point?'

'Okay, don't tell me. But have something to eat. Where are all your things?'

'I didn't bring anything.'

'Fine. Now sit down and eat something.'

Chunilal forced him to eat up. Then he ordered him to lie down and as he shut the door, he said, 'Try to get some sleep. I'll come back at night and wake you up.'

He left. He was back by ten o'clock and found Devdas sleeping like the dead. He didn't wake him; instead he pulled out a mat, laid it out on the floor and went to sleep. Devdas didn't wake up all night and even the morning found him fast asleep. He sat up in his bed at ten in the morning and asked, 'Chuni, when did you come back?'

'Just now.'

'So, I haven't put you to any trouble then?'

'Not at all.'

Devdas stared at his face for a while and asked, 'Chuni, I have nothing. Will you support me?'

Chunilal smiled. He knew that Devdas's father was an exceptionally rich man. He said, 'Me and support you—that's a good one. You can stay here as long as you like, don't worry.'

'Chuni, what is your income?'

'Friend, my income isn't much. There is some property in the village. I have placed it in my brother's care and he sends me seventy rupees every month. That will do nicely for the two of us.'

'Why don't you ever go home?'

Chunilal turned away, 'That's a long story.'

Devdas didn't press any further. Soon they were summoned for lunch. When they had bathed and eaten, they came back to the room. Chunilal asked, 'Devdas, have you fought with your father?'

'No.'

'With someone else?'

Devdas shook his head again, 'No.'

Suddenly Chunilal remembered, 'Oh right, you aren't even married yet.'

At this Devdas turned away and lay down. Within minutes Chunilal realized that he had drifted off to sleep.

Devdas spent all of the next two days sleeping off his fatigue. On the morning of the third day he sat up feeling reasonably better. The dark shadow of gloom seemed to have receded from his expression. Chunilal asked, 'How do you feel today?'

'I guess I'm much better. Chuni, tell me, where do you go at night?'

Today Chunilal had the grace to feel embarrassed. He said, 'Urn, well, yes, I go to—but what about it?'

'Tell me, why have you stopped going to college?'

'I dropped out.'

'Oh no, how could you? The exams start in a couple of months. You have studied off and on. Why don't you give it a try?'

'No. I have given up.' Chunilal fell silent.

Devdas asked again, 'Where do you go—tell me. I want to go with you.'

Chunilal gazed into his face and said, 'You know, Devdas, the place I go to isn't very nice.'

Devdas seemed to mumble to himself, 'Nice or not nice, what does it matter?' Aloud he said, 'Chuni, won't you take me with you?'

'I can. But you shouldn't go there.'

'No, I must go. If I don't like it there, perhaps I won't go again. There's something about the place that makes you anticipate your visit with joy all day long—whatever it is, Chuni, I will go with you.'

Chunilal looked away and smiled a little; he thought to himself, 'He's in for it—that's what happened to me too.' Then he looked at Devdas and said, 'All right, come with me tonight.'

In the afternoon Dharmadas arrived with Devdas's things. When he saw Devdas he burst into tears, 'Deva, Mother has been crying her eyes out these last few days—'

'Why?' he said.

'You left without saying a word.' Dharmadas took a letter from the folds of his shawl and handed it to Devdas, 'Letter from mother.'

Chunilal looked on curiously, eager to know the lie of the land. Devdas read the letter and kept it aside. Mother had begged and ordered him to come back home. She was the only one in that whole house who seemed to have gauged the reason for his disappearance. She had also smuggled some money to him through Dharmadas. He handed it to Devdas and said, 'Deva, come back home.'

'I won't go. You go back home.'

That night the two friends dressed up to the nines and went out. Devdas wasn't too keen on this, but Chunilal refused to go out in simple clothes. At nine o'clock a hired buggy came to a stop before a two-storied house in Chitpore. Chunilal took his hand and pulled him into the house. Its owner was called Chandramukhi—she came out to greet them.

Suddenly Devdas felt totally repulsed. He hadn't been aware how, in the past few days, unconsciously, he had grown to hate the very shadow of womankind. The moment he set eyes on Chandramukhi, the hatred within him flared into life and threatened to consume him. He looked at Chunilal with a frown and asked, 'Chuni, what is this hideous place you have brought me to?'

Both Chunilal and Chandramukhi were flabbergasted by his acrimonious tone and the glare in his eyes. But Chunilal gathered himself quickly, took his hand and spoke softly, 'Come, come on, let's go and sit inside.'

Devdas didn't say anything more. He entered the room and sat down on the mattress with a sickened expression. Silently, Chandramukhi took a seat in another corner of the room. The maid prepared a silver-rimmed hookah and brought it forth, but Devdas didn't even touch it. Chunilal sulked in another corner. The maid, not knowing what was expected of her, handed the hookah to Chandramukhi and left the room. As she puffed on it a few times Devdas looked at her and finally burst out with great venom, 'How terribly rude! And what an ugly sight indeed!'

Chandramukhi had seldom been robbed of speech. Catching her on the wrong foot was next to impossible. But this harsh

exclamation of genuine disgust from Devdas, for some reason, cut her to the quick. For an instant she was dumbfounded. The hookah still blubbed a few times, but Chandramukhi forgot to exhale the smoke. She then handed the hookah to Chunilal and sat there in stupefied silence, gazing at Devdas. None of the three people in the room spoke a word. Only the hookah kept blubbing intermittently, but even its sound seemed hesitant. It was like the sudden stillness that falls after a squabble between friends, where each sits mulling over the issue, taking great offence and thinking, 'So, that's how it is!'

No one seemed comfortable. Chunilal kept the hookah aside and went downstairs, presumably for lack of anything else to do. The two others sat in the room. Devdas looked up and said, 'Do you take money?'

Chandramukhi was lost for words. She was twenty-four years old and in the last ten years or so she had come to know various kinds of men quite intimately. But she had never ever set eyes upon so strange a being. After a moment's hesitation she said, 'Well, since you have deigned to visit...'

Devdas didn't let her finish. 'It's not a question of my deigning—do you or do you not take money?'

'Well, of course I do. How else can we live?'

'Enough, I don't want to hear about all that.' He fished out a note from his pocket, pressed it into Chandramukhi's palm and made as if to leave, never even glancing at how much he had given away.

With undue humility, Chandramukhi said, 'Are you leaving already?'

Devdas didn't answer—he went and stood in the corridor.

Chandramukhi had half a mind to return his money; but she was gripped by a strange sense of awkwardness. Perhaps she was a trifle scared too. Moreover, her kind was used to tolerating much humiliation and many a volatile tantrum; so she stood at the door, still and silent. Devdas descended the stairs and went out into the streets. On his way down he bumped into Chunilal. Surprised, he asked, 'Where are you off to, Devdas?'

'Home.'

'Hey, why?'

Devdas walked a few more steps. Chunilal said, 'I'll come with you.'

Devdas traced his steps back, took his hand and said, 'Let's go.'

'Wait just a moment. I'll be right back.'

'No. I'm leaving. You come later.' Devdas went away.

Chunilal came upstairs and found Chandramukhi still standing at the door, motionless as before. When she saw him, she asked, 'Did your friend leave?'

'Yes.'

Chandramukhi showed him the money and said, 'Look at this; if you wish, you may take this back and give it to your friend.'

Chunilal said, 'He gave it of his own free will, why should I take it back for him?'

After a long time, Chandramukhi was able to smile a little, but it was a mirthless smile. She said, 'Not of his own free will, but with great disgust... because we take money. Chuni-babu, is this man out of his mind?'

'Not at all. But I do believe he has been very upset for the last few days.'

'Why is he upset? Do you know anything about it?'

'No. Maybe it's something at home.'

'So why did you bring him here?'

'I didn't want to. He insisted on coming.'

Now Chandramukhi was truly amazed. She said, 'He insisted? Knowing everything?'

Chunilal gave it some thought and said, 'Well, of course. He knew everything. I could hardly fool him into coming with me.'

Chandramukhi was quiet for a while, thinking. Then she said, 'Chuni-babu, will you do me a favour?'

'What?'

'Where does your friend stay?'

'At my place.'

'Could you bring him here another day?'

'Perhaps not. He has never come to this sort of a place before and probably never will again. But why do you ask?'

Chandramukhi gave a wan smile, 'Chuni-babu, by hook or by crook, get him to come here just once more.'

Chunilal laughed. He winked and said, 'Have you developed a liking for his hatred?'

Chandramukhi laughed too, and said, 'Don't you get it—he shells out money without a second glance!'

Chunilal knew Chandramukhi better than to take her at her word. He shook his head and said, 'Oh no, that's a different sort—that's not you. But tell me the truth, what *is* it?'

Chandramukhi said, 'It's true—I do feel attracted to him.'

Chunilal didn't believe her. He laughed and said, 'You've fallen in love in just these five minutes?'

This time Chandramukhi joined him in his laughter, 'Whatever. Bring him again once when he isn't so upset—I'd like to see him again. Would you, please?'

'I can't promise.'

'For my sake, please?'

'I'll try.'

Chapter 10

Parvati arrived in her husband's house—it was a huge mansion, not newfangled and stylish, but built on old money. Outer courtyards, inner chambers, puja rooms, visiting rooms, guest apartments, office rooms, a battalion of maids and servants—Parvati looked on in wonder. She had heard that her husband was wealthy, he was a zamindar. But she had no idea the wealth was on this scale. If there was a lack in the house, it was of people. The huge inner chambers fairly echoed with emptiness. The new bride was immediately proclaimed the lady of the house. There was an old aunt who welcomed her into the home. Besides her, there were only servants and maids.

Just before dusk, a handsome young man of about twenty came and touched her feet. He stood some distance away and said, 'Mother, I am your eldest son.'

Parvati glanced at him through her veil, but kept quiet. He saluted her once again and said, 'Mother, I am your eldest son—I seek your blessings.'

Now Parvati raised her long veil all the way to her brow and spoke, 'Come, my son, come here.'

The lad was called Mahendra. He stared at Parvati in wonder for a few minutes. Then he began to speak in mild and hushed

tones. 'We lost our mother two years ago. These two years have been quite difficult. Now that you have come ... bless us Mother, so that we may all be happy again.'

Parvati spoke without any hesitation; when you suddenly became the lady of the house, you needed a reservoir of strength and calm. The quirks of circumstances had forced Parvati to mature beyond her years. Besides, she was never one for uncalled-for coyness and redundant pomposity. She asked, 'Where are all my other children, son?'

Mahendra smiled and said, 'I'll tell you—your eldest daughter, my younger sister, is in her husband's house. I did write to her, but Yashoda couldn't come.'

Parvati was saddened; she asked, 'Couldn't come or didn't wish to come?'

Embarrassed, Mahendra said, 'I'm not sure, Mother.'

But from the look on his face Parvati knew that Yashoda was miffed and hence had refused to come. She asked, 'And what about my youngest son?'

Mahendra said, 'He will be here soon. He is in Calcutta and he'll come as soon as his exams finish.'

Bhuvan Chowdhury managed the affairs of the estate himself. The rest of his days, until about eleven at night, were filled with all kinds of charity work, looking after his guests (mostly hermits and saints), keeping a fast and performing the household deity's puja with his own hands, and so on. His new marriage did not bring about much of a change in his daily routine. Some nights he came indoors and on other nights he was unable to come. Even when he did come in, there was very little conversation to be had. He'd lie

down, pull the long bolsters close to him, shut his eyes and say, 'So, you are now the mistress of the house. Look upon everything as your own; you must know how to find your way around the place ...'

Parvati would nod and say, 'All right.'

Thus it went on. One night Bhuvan-babu said, 'Um ... the children ... well, they are all yours from now on—'

Parvati's eyes crinkled in amusement at this display of nervousness from her husband. He laughed a little and went on, 'Yes, and Mahen, your eldest son, he's just passed his BA—such a good boy, such a kind heart—you know, take good care of him—'

Parvati held her laughter in check and said, 'Yes, I know, he is my eldest...'

'Of course you know that. Such a good boy is a rare sight indeed. And my daughter, Yashoda, she is pretty as a picture. She'll come, sure she will. She has to come and see her old father—so when she comes, just...'

Parvati went closer and laid her soft palms on his balding pate. Softly, she murmured, 'Don't you worry. I'll send someone to fetch Yasho, or Mahen will go himself.'

'He will, he will. It's been so long since I saw her. Will you really send for her?'

'Certainly. She is my daughter. Why shouldn't I send for her?'

At this the old man sat up in excitement. Forgetting the relationship between them, he placed his hand on her head and blessed her, 'You will fare well. I give you my blessings—you'll be happy—may God bless you with a long life.' Suddenly, many memories thronged his mind. He lay down again and mumbled to himself, 'My eldest daughter, my only daughter—she loved me a

lot—' A single tear rolled down to his salt and pepper moustache; Parvati gently wiped his cheek with her anchal.

He said in a dreamy whisper, 'Oh, they will all come, the whole household will be bustling ... that's how it used to be earlier, you know. Oh for those days: the children, the wife, all the people, the fun and laughter ringing in the house. Then one day it was all gone. The sons went away to Calcutta, Yasho's in-laws took her away and then it was just a lonely graveyard—' The tears began to roll again, soaking the pillows now. Parvati wiped them tenderly and asked, 'Why didn't you get Mahen married?'

The old man said, 'Oh, that was my dream, that's what I wanted. But God knows what he has on his mind, he just refuses to get married. That's why at this age... the house seemed so empty, devoid of a woman's touch ... the spark was gone. That is why—'

Parvati felt very sad. She tried to force a laugh to her lips as she said, 'If you are old, I'll age quickly too. It doesn't take long for a woman to grow old.'

Bhuvan Chowdhury sat up, took her face in his hands and gazed into it for a long time. He felt like the craftsman who, after finishing the perfect idol, tilts it this way and that and gazes on with pride and a respectful affection. Unknown to himself, a sigh escaped his lips, 'Oh no, you didn't deserve this ...'

'What didn't I deserve?'

'I just thought—you don't belong here—'

Parvati laughed and said, 'Of course I do. What else could I have hoped for?'

Bhuvan-babu lay back and said, 'I know, I know. But, you will be happy. God will look out for you.'

A whole month went by. In the meantime, Nilkantha-babu had come to take his daughter home once. Parvati sent him away. She told her father, 'Baba, the house is a mess. I'll come home later.'

He smiled to himself. Such was a woman's heart, he thought. Once he left, Parvati called Mahendra and said, 'Son, go and fetch my eldest daughter.'

Mahendra hesitated. He knew Yashoda would refuse to come. He said, 'It'll be better if Father went.'

'For shame—how would that look? Instead, let us, mother and son, go and fetch her.'

Mahendra was surprised, 'You will go?'

'What's wrong with that? My pride doesn't get in the way; if my going there can bring Yashoda home, if it soothes her ruffled feathers, it's not too difficult a task.'

The following day Mahendra left by himself to fetch Yashoda home. No one knows what persuasive powers he used there, but four days later Yashoda arrived at the Hatipota house. Parvati was decked in a variety of priceless jewels that day. Bhuvan-babu had got them from Calcutta a few days ago. So Parvati sat there, wearing them all. On her way home Yashoda had rehearsed many dialogues of accusation and anger. But the sight of the new bride took her breath away. She scarcely remembered any of the bitter words she had carefully rehearsed. Barely parting her lips, she breathed, 'Well.'

Parvati took her by the hand and led her to her own room. She sat her down, took the fan in her hand and gently fanning her, she asked, 'Mother, I do believe you are angry with your daughter?'

Mortified, Yashoda blushed. Parvati began to take off her items of jewellery, one by one, and started putting them on Yashoda. Stunned, Yashoda asked, 'What are you doing?'

'Nothing, just a whim of your daughter's.'

Yashoda didn't mind wearing the ornaments and when Parvati was done, a smile played around her lips. Now, bereft of all jewels, Parvati asked again, 'Mother, are you still angry with your daughter?'

'No, no, not angry—why, anger—'

'Of course you are, Maa. But this is your father's house—such a huge mansion, so many servants—I am nothing more than just another one, you know. You really shouldn't be angry with a mere serf

Yashoda was older than Parvati in age, but in word games, Parvati was years ahead of her. Yashoda could merely stare in wonder. As she fanned her, Parvati went on, 'I am a poor girl and you've been kind enough to give me shelter. There are so many hapless, unfortunate souls who get refuge here, under your roof. I am just one of them, a refugee.'

Yashoda had been listening, spellbound. Now she was overcome and dropped at Parvati's feet. 'Oh Mother, please, I beg of you—' she said in a choked voice.

Parvati quickly raised her. Yashoda said, 'Please forgive me.'

The next day Mahendra took Yashoda aside and said, "Well, is your anger appeased?"

Yashoda quickly touched his feet and said, 'Dada, in the heat of the moment—oh dear, the things I said. Please, don't let anyone hear of it.'

Mahendra began to laugh. Yashoda asked, 'But dada, how can a stepmother be so kind, generous and loving?'

A few days later Yashoda came to her father and said, 'Baba, please write to them that I will stay here for the next couple of months'

A little surprised, Bhuvan-babu said, 'Why, what's the matter?'

Yashoda smiled bashfully and said, 'I am not too well—I'd like to stay with Mother for a while.'

Tears of joy welled up in the old man's eyes. In the evening he called Parvati and said, 'You have saved me a lot of embarrassment. Bless you, be happy.'

Parvati said, 'What is this all about?'

'I cannot explain all of it. Oh God, such humiliation, such guilt I have been spared today.' In the falling light, Parvati failed to see the tears swimming in her aged husband's eyes.

Vinodlal, Bhuvan-babu's youngest son, also came home after his exams; he never went back to his studies.

Chapter 11

Devdas roamed the streets in vain for the next few days, a little out of his mind really. Dharmadas went up to him to say something and Devdas bared his teeth and scolded the living daylights out of him. Getting the picture, even Chunilal didn't venture too close. Dharmadas wept bitterly, 'Chuni-babu, why did this happen?'

Chunilal asked, 'What *has* happened, Dharmadas?'

It was like the blind leading the blind. Neither of them knew the truth of the matter. Dharmadas wiped his tears and said, 'Chuni-babu, just do your best to send Deva back to his mother. If he won't study anymore, what's the point of staying here in Calcutta?'

This was true. Chunilal pondered over the suggestion. A few days later, again at dusk, just as Chunilal was leaving the mess, Devdas appeared from nowhere and took his hands in his own. 'Chuni, are you going there?' he asked.

Diffident, Chunilal said, 'Yes—but if you don't want me to go, I'll stay.'

Devdas said, 'No, I won't stop you. But tell me something—what do you expect to gain there?'

'There are no expectations. Just a way of whiling away the hours.'

'But do they? While away? The hours, I mean. They don't for me. I do so want them to.'

Chunilal looked at him intently, trying to gauge his thoughts from the look on his face. Then he said, 'Devdas, what is the matter with you—won't you tell me everything?'

'Nothing is the matter with me.'

'You won't tell me?'

'No, Chuni, there is nothing to say.'

Chunilal was quiet for a few moments and then he asked sheepishly, 'Devdas, will you do me a favour?'

'What?'

'Will you go there once more? I have promised.'

'That place where we went the other day?'

'Yes.'

'Oh no, I hated it.'

'I'll see that you like it this time.'

Devdas mulled over this for a while absentmindedly and then said, 'All right, let's go.'

Chunilal had held the ladder for Devdas to make his descent into the murky depths and then quietly moved away.

Now Devdas sat alone in Chandramukhi's room. She sat in one corner, looking on wretchedly. Once, she spoke from concern, 'Devdas, don't drink any more.'

Devdas placed the glass on the floor, frowned bitterly and asked, 'Why?'

'You have taken to drink very recently, you won't be able to bear it.'

'I don't drink in order to bear it. I only drink because I am here.'

Chandramukhi had heard this before. Sometimes she wanted to hit her head on the wall and bleed to death. She was in love with Devdas.

He hurled the glass away. It hit the wooden chair and shattered into bits. He lay back against the pillows and spoke incoherently, 'I don't have the strength to get up and go, that's why I stay here—I am senseless, that's why I look at you and talk. But Chandra, still I don't lose my sense completely—a little remains—I cannot touch you—I feel repulsed.'

Chandramukhi wiped her eyes and said, 'Devdas, so many people who come here never touch alcohol.'

Devdas's eyes widened and he sat up. He flailed his arms about deliriously and said, 'Never touch it? If I had a gun I would have shot them. They are worse sinners than me, Chandramukhi.'

He stopped and seemed to drown in his thoughts. Then he said, 'If I ever give up drinking—though I never will—then I will never come here again. I may be saved yet, but what of them?' he paused briefly and then went on, 'I have taken to drink from much misery—our friend in times of trouble—I can never let you go ...'

Devdas began to chafe his face on the pillow. Chandramukhi came close and held his face up. Devdas frowned and said, 'Ahh, don't touch me—I still haven't lost my senses. Chandramukhi, you don't know—only I know how much I hate your kind. I'll always hate you—but still, I'll come, sit and talk—I have no choice. Will you ever understand? Ha ha—people choose to sin under the cover of darkness and I come here to drown my sorrows in drink: there couldn't be a better place for this. And you all...'

Devdas focussed his eyes to rest on her poignant face and said, 'We—II, the very soul of forbearance. You are the prime example of how much humiliation and assault, how many jibes and insults a woman can stand.'

He lay down flat on his back and whispered, 'Chandramukhi claims she loves me—I don't want it—never—people act on stage, don their makeup, dress like a thief, a beggar, a king or a queen—and they love, they speak of so much love, weep such tears, as if it were all true. My Chandramukhi loves to act and I watch . . . but *she* comes to mind . . . how did it all go so wrong? In an instant we parted . . . Now my life is one long act. One desperate drunk and this one, a wh—... oh fine, so be it. No hopes, no faith, no joy and no desires ... brilliant.'

Devdas turned away and continued to mutter. Chandramukhi couldn't hear what he was saying anymore. Very soon he dropped off to sleep. Chandramukhi came and sat beside him. She wiped his face with her sari and changed the soaked pillow. She fanned him for a while and continued to sit there despondently. When it was nearly one at night, she blew out the lamp, shut the door and left the room.

Chapter 12

Many of the villagers, and the two brothers Dwijodas and Devdas, performed the last rites of the zamindar Narayan Mukherjee and came back home. Dwijodas wept like a child out of control—it took a few men to hold him in check. Devdas sat beside a pillar, calm and collected. Not a word escaped his lips and not a tear came to his eyes. No one held him, no one even tried to console him. Just once, Madhusudan Ghosh tried to approach him, saying, 'Fate, my child ...'

Devdas raised his arm, indicating Dwijodas, and said, 'Over there.'

Ghosh-babu backed off, embarrassed, muttering, 'Yes, well, he was a great man . . .' No one else ventured close. When it was past noon, Devdas went and sat at his mother's feet where she lay in a faint. Some women sat around her; Parvati's grandmother was also present. Her voice broke as she addressed the bereaved widow, 'Child, look who is here—it's Devdas.'

Devdas called out, 'Mother.' She opened her eyes and merely said, 'Son.' Then the tears began to roll from the eyes shut tight. The assembled women broke out into loud wails.

Devdas laid his face on his mother's feet. Then he got up slowly and walked away. He went into his dead father's room. His eyes

were dry and his body was cold as a statue. He squatted on the floor and raised his bloodshot eyes to the roof. The very sight of him now would have driven anyone cold with fear. His veins stood out in his temples and his hair stood on end. His fair skin was now a burnished copper shade, what with all the excesses in Calcutta and then the sleepless nights following his father's death. Those who had seen him a year ago would perhaps not even recognize him now.

A little later Parvati's mother came looking for him. She pushed the door open and called, 'Devdas.'

'What is it, Aunty?'

'This won't do, my son.'

Devdas stared at her, 'What have I done, Aunty?'

Parvati's mother knew the answer, but it wouldn't escape her lips. She pulled his head onto her lap and said, 'Dev-ta, child.'

'What is it?'

'Devtacharan, son .. .'

At last he hid his face in her bosom and shed a single tear.

Even a bereaved family's days pass swiftly. A new day dawned, the weeping and wailing was less intense. Dwijodas was himself again. His mother had also roused herself and went about her chores, wiping her eyes frequently. Two days later Dwijodas called Devdas and asked, 'How much should be spent on Father's last rites?'

Devdas looked at his elder brother, 'Whatever is deemed necessary.'

'But brother, it is no longer my decision alone. You have grown up and your opinion is important too.'

Devdas asked, 'How much cash is there?'

'There is a lakh and half in Father's account. I feel ten thousand would be a good amount to spend.'

'How much is my share?'

Dwijodas hesitated, 'You'll get half. If we spend ten thousand, then you and I will get seventy thousand each.'

'What will Mother have?'

'She doesn't need cash. She is the mistress of the house—we will look after her.'

Devdas thought for some time and then said, 'I think we should spend five thousand from your share and twenty-five from mine. Of the remaining fifty thousand in my name, half should be kept in Mother's account and half can be handed over to me. What do you think?'

At first Dwijodas seemed a little embarrassed. But then he said, 'Excellent. Actually, you know, since I have a family—weddings, education and so on—you know how it is. This would be the best.' After a brief pause he said, 'If you could just put it on paper—'

'Is that really necessary? It doesn't look good. At such a time—I think all this money-talk should be just between us.'

'That's true. But you know ...'

'Okay, I'll put it in writing.' The same day Devdas made out the requisite papers.

The next day, as he climbed down the stairs he spotted Parvati standing in a corner and stopped in his tracks. Parvati was staring at him, as if she could hardly recognize him. Devdas walked up to her and in his calm and serene voice he asked her, 'When did you get here, Paro?'

That same voice. They were meeting after three years. Abashed, Parvati looked at her feet and said, 'This morning.'

'It's been a long time. Are you all right?'

Parvati nodded.

'How is Chowdhury-babu? And the children?'

'They are all fine.' Parvati stole a glance at his face. But she simply couldn't bring herself to ask how he was, what he was doing. At that moment she had run out of questions all of a sudden.

Devdas asked, 'Will you be here for a while?'

'Yes.'

'Well then—'

He walked away.

The last rites were performed in due course. The day after, Parvati took Dharmadas aside and handed him a gold chain. 'Dharma, this is for your daughter.'

Dharmadas's eyes grew moist as he said, 'It's been so long since we saw you. Is everything all right, didi?'

'Everything's fine. And your family?'

'They're fine, didi.'

'How are you?'

Dharmadas sighed deeply and said, 'How do you think? Master has gone, now I wish to go as well.' Dharmadas looked like he would pour out his heart. But Parvati stopped him. She hadn't gifted him the chain for nothing. She asked, 'Don't talk like that, Dharma, if you go who will look after Dev-da?'

Dharmadas struck his brow and said, 'Oh, I've looked after him enough when he was a child; now I wish I didn't have to see him.'

Parvati edged closer to him, 'Dharma, will you give me an honest answer?'

'Why not, didi.'

'Then tell me the truth—what does Dev-da do nowadays?'

'Rubbish and nonsense, what else?'

'Dharmadas, do tell me.'

He struck his brow again and said, 'What is there to tell, didi, there's nothing left to tell. Now that Master's gone and Deva has come into a lot of money, things can only get worse.'

Parvati's face fell. She had heard some rumours. Apprehensively she asked, 'Really, Dharma?'

She had got a whiff of something from Manorama's letters, but she hadn't believed it. Dharmadas shook his head and went on, 'No food, no sleep, just the bottle and nothing else. He stays away for days on end. He's blown so much money away—I've heard that he has given that woman jewellery worth many thousand rupees.'

Parvati shivered from head to toe. 'Is this all true, Dharmadas?'

He mumbled to himself, 'He may listen to you—please stop him. Look at the state his health is in—at this rate his days are numbered. Who can I talk to about this? This is not something you can say to his parents or his brother.' Dharmadas banged his head on the wall, and wailed, 'Sometimes I want to die, Paro.'

Parvati left. She had hastened back when she heard of Narayanbabu's death. She had thought that she should be at Devdas's side in these troubled times. But what had become of her beloved Dev-da? Memories crowded her mind. If she directed one criticism at Devdas, she hurled a thousand curses at herself. If she had been there, would things have come to such a pass? She had already cut her nose to spite her face, but now the joke was truly on her. Here was her Dev-da, wasting away, rotting in fact... and she was busy setting up someone else's home. She was doling out charity

everyday, drawing strangers to her bosom, and the one person who meant everything to her—he was almost starving to death. Parvati promised herself that she would go and talk to Devdas.

It was a little before dusk when Parvati entered Devdas's room. He was sitting on the bed studying some accounts. He looked up as she entered. Slowly, Parvati shut the door, bolted it and sat on the floor. Devdas looked at her with a smile on his lips. His face was sad, yet calm. Suddenly, he said, 'What if I dragged your name in the mud?'

Parvati shot him a quick, pained glance from her bright eyes and lowered them immediately. That look made it very clear that the comment would always be lodged in her heart as a painful reminder. She had come with so much to say, but her mind went blank now. Every time she came near him, she seemed to lose her powers of speech.

Devdas laughed again, 'I know, I know, you're feeling shy, right?'

But she still couldn't talk. He went on, 'Don't be. So, okay, we made a mistake, the fault was on both ends—now look at the mess we are both in. You spoke in anger and haste, I wounded you on the brow—I suppose that makes us even.'

His words were devoid of sarcasm or derision; he spoke of the past with a pleasant, contented look. But Parvati felt her heart was ready to burst. She covered her face, held her breath and said to herself, 'Dev-da, that wound is my salvation, my only hope. You loved me and so you were kind enough to inscribe our sweet memories on my brow. It is no shame to me, no disgrace—but a matter of pride.'

'Paro.'

She answered through the cover of her sari, "What is it?"

'I often feel very angry with you—'

At last, his voice took on a bitter edge. 'Father is gone, it is a difficult time in my life; but if you were with me, I wouldn't feel it so. You know my brother's wife, and my brother's nature too. What am I to do with Mother now? And I simply do not know what will become of me. If you were here, I could happily drop it all in your lap and ... what's that, Paro?'

Parvati was sobbing helplessly.

Devdas said, 'Are you crying? Then I have to stop talking.'

Parvati wiped her eyes and said, 'No, go on.'

In an instant Devdas cleared his voice of all emotion and asked, 'Paro, I believe you have turned into an expert homemaker? A proper wife, are you?'

Inwardly Parvati bit into her lips and thought, 'Not really. What's the point if the flower is never laid at the feet of the deity?'

Devdas laughed out loud, 'I think it's really funny. You were this tiny little thing, and now look at you. Big house, large estate, grown children—and Chowdhury-babu, everything suitably aged... what are you laughing about?'

Chowdhury-babu was a great amusement to Parvati; whenever he came to mind, she wanted to smile. Even in this tearful state, she grinned.

Devdas assumed a fake air of gravity and asked, 'Could you do me a favour?'

'What?'

'Are there any nice girls in your part of the land?'

Parvati gulped, choked and spluttered, 'Nice girls? Whatever for?'

'I could marry one. I feel like settling down, just for once.'

Parvati donned a straight and sweet face, 'She has to be very beautiful, right?'

'No more than you.'

'And she has to be a good soul?'

'No, not too much of that—perhaps a little playful—someone who can squabble with me like you used to do.'

Parvati thought, no one else can do that, Dev-da. For that she'd have to love you as much as I do. But instead, she said, 'Well, that's easy. Thousands like me would be honoured to call you their own.'

Devdas jested merrily, 'For the moment, just one will do. Can you get me one?'

'Dev-da, would you really marry?'

'I just told you.' But he didn't tell her that she was the only woman he would ever be interested in, for as long as he lived.

'Dev-da, can I ask you something?'

'What?'

Parvati collected her wits and asked him, 'Why did you suddenly start drinking?'

Devdas laughed, 'That doesn't take a lot of practice, does it?'

'All right, but why did you make it a habit?'

'Who told you this, Dharmadas?'

'That doesn't matter. Isn't it true?'

Devdas didn't deceive her. He said, 'Yes, to some extent.'

Parvati sat there in shocked silence. After a while she asked, 'And have you given this woman a few thousand rupees' worth of jewellery?'

Devdas laughed again, 'I haven't given them to her, but I have got them made. Do you want them?'

Parvati stretched out her palm, 'Why not? Look, I have no ornaments.'

'Chowdhury-babu didn't give you any?'

'He did. But I gave it all away to his eldest daughter.'

'Don't you want any?'

Parvati shook her head and dropped her gaze.

Now Devdas truly wanted to weep. He could well imagine the despair that would drive a woman to give away her ornaments. But he held his tears in check and spoke slowly, 'It's all a lie, Paro. I do not love another woman and I have not given her any jewels'

Parvati heaved a great sigh and I said to herself, 'I thought as much.'

They were both silent for many minutes. Finally Parvati said, 'But promise me, you'll never touch liquor again.'

'I can't do that. Could you promise never to think of me again?'

Parvati was quiet. Someone blew on the conch outside, heralding the dusk. Devdas glanced at the window anxiously and said, 'It's getting late, Paro; go home now.'

'I won't go. Promise me first.'

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'Not everyone can do everything.'

'I'm sure they can if they want to.'

'Really? Can you run away with me tonight?'

For a split second Parvati's heart forgot to beat. Bemused, she mumbled, 'That's impossible.'

Devdas edged away on the bed and commanded, 'Paro, open the door.'

Parvati moved a little to cover the door with her back and said, 'Promise me.'

Devdas stood up and spoke with calm deliberation, 'Paro, is there any point in forcing a promise? Today's promise may be broken tomorrow. Why would you have me marked faithless?'

Again, many minutes passed in utter silence. Suddenly a clock chimed somewhere, signalling nine o'clock. Devdas came to life at that. 'Oh Paro, open the door, quick—' he said.

Parvati didn't speak.

'Paro ...'

'I won't go,' Parvati broke down and fell to the ground. She wept bitterly.

It was pitch dark inside the room and nothing was visible. Devdas could merely guess that Parvati lay on the floor, weeping. He called softly, 'Paro.'

Parvati sobbed, 'Dev-da, I am miserable.'

Devdas edged closer. He too had tears in his eyes, but his voice was still steady. 'Don't I know it?' he said softly.

'Dev-da, I feel like death. I could never get to take care of you—I always wanted to—'

In the dark, Devdas wiped his eyes. 'There's time yet for that,' he said.

'Then come home with me. There's no one to look after you here.'

'If I go to your home, will you take real good care of me?'

'I have always wanted to. Dear God, please make this wish come true. After that, I wouldn't even mind if I died.'

Now Devdas's tears flowed.

Parvati spoke again, 'Dev-da, come home with me.'

Devdas tried to wipe his tears away and said, 'All right, I will.'

'Will you? Swear on me?'

Devdas aimed somewhere at her feet and said, 'I will never forget this promise: if it makes you happy to take care of me, I will come. If it's the last thing I do, I'll come to you.'

Chapter 13

Devdas stayed at home for six months after his father's death, then he grew quite restless. Life seemed to drag on—there was no peace, no joy. Moreover he was constantly plagued with thoughts of Parvati. These days she came to mind ever so often. His brother Dwijodas and his nagging wife made life even more difficult for him.

His mother was in the same state. With her husband's death all joy seemed to have gone out of her life. The house became unbearable to her, she felt like she was living in a cage. She considered moving to Varanasi; but she couldn't go without getting Devdas married first.

She told him, 'Devdas, get married; let me see you settled—then I can die in peace.' But it wasn't so easy. The period of mourning was still on and they would also have to find a suitable girl. These days she felt a little sad—sometimes she felt that perhaps it would have been for the best if they had got him wedded to Parvati when the matter had come up.

One day she called Devdas to her and said, 'Devdas, I can't stand this any more. I want to go to Varanasi.' Devdas was of the same mind. He said, 'I agree with you. Go there for six months and then come back.'

'Yes, my son, make the arrangements. After I return we can complete his annual rites, I can get you married and then move back to Varanasi for good.'

Devdas agreed. He went and left his mother in Varanasi and then returned to Calcutta. Back in the city, he spent three or four days hunting for Chunilal, but apparently he had moved out and gone somewhere else.

Then one evening Devdas remembered Chandramukhi. He could look her up, couldn't he? In all these days he had never once thought of her. He felt a trifle abashed. That evening he hired a buggy and arrived at Chandramukhi's house. After much calling and hollering, a voice spoke from within, 'Not here.'

There was a gas lamp close by. Devdas went and stood below it and shouted, 'Could you tell me where that woman has gone?'

Someone opened a window and stared at him for a while. 'Are you Devdas?' a woman's voice said.

'Yes.'

'Wait, I'll open the door.'

She opened the door and said, 'Come in.'

He felt the voice was familiar, but couldn't quite place it. It was quite dark as well. Suspiciously, he asked, 'Could you tell me where Chandramukhi has gone?'

The woman smiled, 'I could. Please come upstairs.'

Now Devdas recognized her, 'You.'

'Yes, it's me. Devdas, did you forget me so easily?'

When he went upstairs, Devdas saw that she was dressed in a black bordered plain white sari which looked quite worn. There were two bangles on her wrists and no other jewellery besides that.

Her hair was dishevelled. Taken aback, he asked, 'What happened?' He noticed that she had lost a lot of weight. He asked, 'Have you been ill?'

Chandramukhi laughed and said, 'Not physically, no. Have a seat.'

Devdas sat on the bed and noticed that the room had changed a fair bit. Like its mistress, it looked worn out and frayed. The furniture was gone; there was just the bed. Even the sheets were shabby. The pictures on the wall were gone; the nails on which they had hung stuck out. Some of them still had bits of thread hanging from them. The wall clock was still there, but it had fallen silent. Spiders had woven their webs to their heart's content all around it. A lamp burned in one corner and gave enough light for Devdas to take in the new look of the room. A little shocked, a little outraged, he asked, 'Chandra, how did this disaster happen?'

Chandramukhi smiled wanly and said, 'You call it a disaster? I'd call it a stroke of luck.'

Devdas was puzzled. 'Where are all your ornaments?' he asked.

'I've sold them.'

'The furniture?'

'Sold those too.'

'Have you sold the paintings as well?'

This time she giggled and pointed to the house across the road. 'I gave them away to the maid.'

Devdas gazed at her for some time. 'Where is Chuni?' he asked finally.

'I don't know. He squabbled with me a couple of months ago and left. Never came back.'

Even more surprised, Devdas asked, 'Why the squabble?'

'Don't they happen?'

'They do—but why?'

'He was touting and so I threw him out.'

'What was he touting?'

Chandramukhi smiled, 'Jute.' Then she said, 'Don't you know what? He brought along a rich man, two hundred rupees a month, hordes of jewellery and a guard at my door, do you understand?'

The penny dropped and Devdas laughed, 'But I don't see all that anywhere?'

'You would have if they were here. I showed them the door.'

'What were they guilty of?'

'Nothing. I just didn't like it.'

Devdas mulled over the matter for a long time, 'And since then no one has been here?'

'No. Not just since then, but since the day you left, no one has been here. Only Chuni-babu came and sat around sometimes. But for the last two months even that has stopped.'

Devdas lay down on the bed. He was quiet, in a world of his own. Slowly he asked, 'Chandramukhi, have you closed down the business?'

'Yes—I went bankrupt.'

Devdas hedged, 'But how will you survive?'

'Didn't I just tell you, I have sold my jewellery.'

'That can't be much.'

'True. I have about eight or nine hundred rupees. I have kept the money with a grocer. He gives me twenty rupees a month.'

'But earlier, that wouldn't have sustained you?'

'No, and it doesn't do very well now either. I still have three months' rent to pay. So I think I'll just sell these two bangles, pay off all my debts and move away somewhere.'

'Where?'

'I haven't decided yet. Somewhere cheap—maybe a village—where twenty rupees would be enough for me.'

'Why haven't you gone yet? If you really don't need anything more, why did you let the debts pile up over all these months?'

Chandramukhi lowered her eyes, trying to sort out her thoughts. For the first time in her life, she was embarrassed to speak. Devdas asked, 'Why aren't you saying anything?'

Chandramukhi sat on the edge of the bed hesitantly and spoke with great trepidation, 'Don't get angry—I had hoped to see you once before I go. I wished you'd come back, just once. Now that you have come, I'll make my arrangements tomorrow. But, could you tell me where I should go?'

Staggered, Devdas sat up in bed. 'Just to see me? But why?'

'Just a whim. Perhaps because no one had ever rejected me in that way. You hated me fervently. I don't know if you remember, but I remember it well—the day you came here for the first time I felt attracted to you. I knew you were the son of a wealthy man; but that wasn't what drew me to you. So many men had come and gone before you, but I had never sensed such boldness in them. You came and you wounded me—an unprovoked assault—strangely appropriate—and yet so, so unfair. You turned away from me in revulsion and finally, almost in jest, you threw some money at me. Do you remember?'

Devdas was silent. Chandramukhi continued, 'Since then, I had eyes only for you. Not for love, nor hatred. I couldn't forget you, the way it is difficult to forget a novelty, I suppose. When you'd come, I used to be tense and fearful, but when you didn't come, nothing seemed right. And then, I don't know what went wrong—

but everything started looking very different. I changed so much that the earlier "I" could no longer recognize myself. You had taken to the bottle. I hate alcohol. I always hated it when someone got drunk in my house. But when you got drunk, I never felt anger. I only felt misery.'

Chandramukhi touched Devdas's feet. There were tears in her eyes as she said, 'I am a sinner, please forgive me. The more you hurled insults at me, the more you pushed me away, the more I wanted to draw you closer. Finally, whenever you fell asleep . . . anyway, let all that be. You might fly into a rage again.'

Devdas didn't say a word. These new sentiments were very distressful to him. Chandramukhi wiped away her tears and said, 'One day, you spoke of how much we tolerate, the insults, the assaults—I felt very hurt. The very next day I stopped it all.'

Devdas sat up. 'But what about survival?'

Chandramukhi said, 'I just told you.'

'What if the grocer cheats you out of all your money?'

Chandramukhi didn't look troubled. Quite calmly she replied, 'That won't be unusual. I have thought of that too. If I am in real trouble, I'll beg some money from you.'

Devdas thought about this. 'That's all right,' he said. 'But for now, make your plans and move somewhere else.'

'I'll start the arrangements tomorrow. I'll sell my bangles and then go and meet the grocer.'

Devdas fished into his pocket, brought out five hundred-rupee notes and tucked them under the pillow. 'Don't sell the bangles, but meet the grocer for sure. Where would you go, on a pilgrimage?'

'No, Devdas. I am not a great one for faith. I won't go too far from Calcutta—some nearby village perhaps.'

'Do you want to work as a maid with some genteel family?'

Chandramukhi's eyes filled with tears again. She wiped them and said, 'I don't want to do that. I would like to live independently and comfortably. Why should I slave? I have never done a day's hard labour in my life and I won't be able to do it now. If I submit my body to much more, it might fall apart.'

Despondent, Devdas smiled at that. He said, 'But if you live close to the city, you may be tempted again. You can never trust the human mind.'

Chandramukhi smiled. She said, 'That is very true indeed. But I will never be tempted again. I do accept that women can be tempted by very little. But since I have given up all the temptations of my own free will, I am not afraid. If it had been a momentary whim, I may have been in danger of going back to it all. But in all these days, there hasn't been a moment when I have regretted my decision. I am really quite happy.'

Devdas still shook his head, 'Women are very restless, very fickle.'

Chandramukhi came and sat very close to him and took his hand, 'Devdas.'

He looked at her, but couldn't bring himself to say, 'Don't touch me.'

Chandramukhi pulled his hands on to her lap, looking at them lovingly, eyes widened with bliss, and said, 'This is the last day—don't be angry with me. I have always wanted to ask you something.' Her eyes scanned his face for a while and she asked quietly, 'Did Parvati hurt you very badly?'

Devdas frowned, 'Why do you ask?'

Chandramukhi didn't falter. In a calm and confident tone, she said, 'I need to know. Very honestly speaking, I feel the pain

whenever you are hurt. Besides, I probably know a lot about this. Sometimes, when you were dead drunk, you've said a lot and I have listened. But still, I don't believe Parvati has cheated you. Instead, I feel, you have cheated yourself. Devdas, I am older than you, I have seen much of the world. Do you know what I think? I feel quite sure that you are in the wrong. I feel women do not deserve all their reputation for being whimsical and fickle. It's you, men, who praise them no end—and then it's you who blame them and pull them down from their pedestal. You are able to speak your mind with ease. They cannot express themselves so easily. Even if they do, few understand them, because what they say is mumbled, easily drowned out by your loud voice. What happens in the end is that nobody sees the women's point of view—they are simply badmouthed.'

Chandramukhi paused, cleared her throat and went on, 'I have traded in love many times in my life, but only once have I truly loved. It is a very precious thing. I have learnt a lot from it. Do you know that love is one thing and desire another? The two are often confused—and it's men who confuse them the most. I believe women are less inclined to be blinded by looks, and hence we don't get carried away as easily as you do. When you come and tell us of your love, in so many ways, means, words and gestures, we are silent. Sometimes we don't wish to hurt you, or we are unsure. Even when we hate the very sight of your face, we are perhaps too shy to say it. Then there starts an act—a pretense at loving. One day, when the performance ends, men are furious and they say, "treachery". Everyone listens to them, pays them heed—and we still hold our tongue. There's so much hurt, such misery, but who cares about all that?'

Devdas was silent. Chandramukhi looked at him long and hard before going on, 'Sometimes a woman takes pity on a man, and, mistakenly, feels that is love. She goes about her duties, supports you staunchly in times of trouble—and you praise her to the skies. But perhaps she is still a novice at the game of love. Then, if at an unfortunate moment her heart shatters and she bares her feelings to you in unbearable pain, then,' she glanced at Devdas and said, 'then you all call her a faithless creature.'

Suddenly Devdas placed his fingers against her lips and said, 'Chandramukhi, what...'

Chandramukhi moved his hand away from her mouth slowly and said, 'Don't worry Devdas, I wasn't talking of your Parvati.' She fell silent.

Devdas was lost in thought for some time. Then he said, 'But there are customs, there are social norms.'

Chandramukhi said, 'Of course they are there. And that is why Devdas, whoever is truly in love, simply bears his pain. If one can feel the satisfaction of just loving someone, deep in his heart, then he wouldn't want to disrupt the rhythm of society and its rules. But where was I... for sure, I feel that Parvati hasn't cheated you one bit and you have done it all by yourself; I know you do not have the capacity to understand this today. But if the time ever comes, you will know that I spoke the truth.'

Devdas's eyes brimmed with tears. For some strange reason, today he began to feel Chandramukhi was right. She saw his tears, but didn't try to wipe them away. She said to herself, 'I have seen you often in many different moods. I know you well. You would never be able to offer your heart the way ordinary men do. But

beauty—ah well, everyone falls for beauty. But could you sacrifice all your pride just for the sake of beauty? No. Parvati may be very beautiful, but even so, I believe she loved you first, she spoke of it first. I can feel it.'

As she talked to herself, she spoke aloud the last sentence, 'I can tell from myself how much she must love you.'

Devdas sat up on the bed, "What did you say?"

Chandramukhi said, 'Nothing. I was just saying that she couldn't have fallen for your looks. You may be handsome, but that wouldn't make her fall for you. Not everyone can appreciate this aggressive, brash charm of yours. Those who do, of course, can never call their heart their own again.' She heaved a sigh and said, 'Only someone who has loved you knows how charming you are. There isn't a woman on this earth who would deny herself this heaven.' After a few minutes' silence, she spoke softly and slowly, 'It's a beauty that seldom meets the eye. It casts its shadow on the very depths of the heart and then, when the day ends, it burns in the pyre and turns to ash.'

Devdas looked at Chandramukhi with a glazed expression. 'What are you saying, Chandramukhi?' he said quietly.

Her slight smile held a bit of mockery. 'There's no greater predicament, Devdas,' she said, 'than when the one you do not love speaks to you of love for you. But I really spoke for Parvati, not for me.'

Devdas made as if to rise. 'I must go now,' he said.

'Please sit. I have never had your company when you weren't drunk, I have never held your hands and talked—oh, what joy.' She burst out laughing.

Surprised, Devdas asked, 'Why do you laugh?'

'Nothing. Just something I remembered—it's nearly ten years ago, when I first fell in love and left my home. I used to feel my heart swelling with the power of love then—I used to feel that I could die for it. Then, one day, we fought over a piece of jewellery and never ever saw each other's faces again. I told myself he hadn't really loved me, if he had he would have given the ornament away to me.' She laughed again. The next instant her face grew calm and somber. 'Jewels, my foot. Little did I know that one can be sometimes willing to lay down one's life even to get rid of a simple headache. I didn't know the pain of the saints, or the anguish of the virtuous. Devdas, just about everything is possible in this world, isn't it?'

Devdas couldn't find an answer. He stared at her, lost for words; then he said, 'I must go—'

"What's the problem? Go a little later. I don't want to hold on to you; those days are gone. Now I hate myself just as much as you are repulsed by me. But Devdas, why don't you marry?'

At last, Devdas seemed to breathe; he laughed and said, 'I know I should. But I don't have the inclination.'

'Still, you must. The sight of your children can bring you great happiness. Besides, my problems would also end. I could easily be a maid in your house.'

Devdas laughed out loud, 'Fine then, I'll send for you when I marry.'

Chandramukhi didn't seem to notice his laughter. She said, 'Devdas, I want to ask you one more question.'

'What?'

'Why did you sit and listen to me for so long?'

'Is there a problem with that?'

'I don't know. But it's certainly different. You never used to look at my face unless you were senseless, in a drunken stupor.'

Devdas avoided the question and spoke glumly, 'I cannot drink now, for a year after my father's death.'

Chandramukhi looked at him with sad eyes and asked, 'Do you want to go back to drinking?'

'I can't say.'

She pulled his hands closer and spoke through the tears clogging her throat. 'If it's possible, don't take it up again. Don't bring such a beautiful life to an end before its time.'

Suddenly Devdas got up and said, 'I must go. Wherever you go, keep me posted—if you ever need anything, don't hesitate to ask me.'

Chandramukhi touched his feet and said, 'Bless me and wish me happiness. And ... one more thing: God forbid, but if you ever need someone to attend to you ... please think of me.'

'I will.'

Devdas left. Chandramukhi held her face in her hands and sobbed, 'Dear God, please let me meet him just once more in this lifetime.'

Chapter 14

Two years had passed. Parvati was a little relaxed now, after she had got Mahendra married. Jaladbala, his wife, was intelligent and efficient. She had taken over many of the household chores.

So Parvati had time to turn to other things. She had been married for five years now. Since she was childless, she felt greatly drawn to other people's children. She took up all expenses for the children who came from all the families who lived nearby, the poorest of the poor as well as those who had limited means of subsistence. In addition, she spent her days in the puja room, and in serving the ill and aged as well as the guests in her homestead. She had got her husband to open up another set of guest rooms where the homeless could stay as long as they wished. They were cared for and provided for by the zamindar's household.

Parvati did something else in secret—even her husband wasn't privy to it. She helped out poor but decent families financially, drawing on her own resources. Whatever she got from her husband every month towards her own upkeep was spent in meeting these costs. This didn't remain a secret from the clerks and officers of the estate though. They talked among themselves. The maids whispered back and forth about how the household expenses had nearly doubled. The vaults were empty, there were no savings, the

rumour went. The superfluous expenses were seemingly causing the servants grave concern. Jaladbala often heard them talking about it. One night she asked her husband, 'Are you a nobody in this house?'

Mahendra said, 'Why do you say that?'

She said, 'The servants can see it all, and you can't? Father may be besotted by his new bride, he won't say anything. But you should protest.'

Mahendra didn't quite get it, but he was interested. 'Protest about what?'

Jaladbala grew serious and began to advise her husband, 'Our new mother doesn't have children—*so* she isn't interested in the family savings. She spends money like water, can't you see that?'

Mahendra frowned, 'How so?'

Jaladbala said, 'You would see it if you had a pair of eyes in your head. These days the household expenses have doubled—all these fasts and ceremonies, charities, and no end of guests and saintly beggars. She may be doing it all to benefit her in her afterlife. But you are going to have children—what will they eat? If you give away all your wealth, are they going to go begging?'

Mahendra sat up on the bed, 'Who are you talking of—Mother?'

Jaladbala said, 'Oh God, hapless am I that I have to spell it out thus.'

Mahendra said, 'And so you have come to me with a complaint against Mother?'

Jalad was indignant, 'I have no use for complaints and quarrels. I have just told you how things are, or you might blame me some day.'

Mahendra was silent for some minutes and then he said, 'Your father's household scarcely gets two square meals a day. What would you know of the expenses in a landlord's house?'

Now Jaladbala was furious. 'And pray tell me, how many guest rooms are there in your Mother's house?'

Mahendra didn't want to go in for a squabble. He just lay there quietly. In the morning he went to Parvati and said, 'What a match you have chosen for me, Mother. I can't live with her. I'm leaving for Calcutta.'

Surprised, Parvati asked, 'Why, son?'

'She speaks ill of you—I disown her.'

Parvati had observed Jaladbala for some time; she evaded the issue and laughed, 'Shame on you, my son. She is a gem of a girl.'

Parvati then called Jaladbala into her room and asked, 'Child, have you and Mahendra fought over something?'

Jaladbala had noticed her husband's preparations for Calcutta with some trepidation all morning; at her mother-in-law's words she burst into tears and said, 'My fault, Mother. But these maids keep talking about the expenses.'

Parvati sat and heard her out. She felt contrite as she wiped her daughter-in-law's tears, 'Child, you have spoken well. You see, I am not good at accounts and so I lose track of the expenditure.'

She called Mahendra to her and said, 'Son, don't be angry—you are her husband and your benefit comes before all else for her. She is a good wife.'

From that day on Parvati curbed her generous impulses. The guests didn't get such lavish care as before; many of the homeless, maimed and ill who showed up had to be turned away. When

Bhuvan-babu heard of this, he sent for Parvati and asked her, 'Have we gone through our coffers—are we out of money?'

Parvati laughed, 'Charity isn't everything. For a while we should also try to save a bit. See how our expenses have shot up.'

'That's all right. My days are drawing to a close. We should do some good deeds and take care of our afterlife, shouldn't we?'

Parvati laughed, 'That is very selfish. You think of yourself, and what about the children? Let's just go easy for some time and then it can all begin again. Charity never comes to an end.'

Bhuvan-babu didn't pursue the matter further.

Parvati had less to do these days and so there was more time on her hands, to think and to think. But thoughts come in patterns. Those who have hope in their heart think in one way. And those who have no hope think in quite a different manner. The thoughts of the hopeful are full of sparkle, joy, expectation, gratification, anxiety and sorrow; the cavalcade tires the soul and can't go on for long. But the hopeless have no joy, no sorrow, no anxiety and no expectation. It's not that there aren't tears any more, or even new realizations about life, but fresh insights don't make one sit up and take notice any longer. The thoughts float around like weightless clouds. They stop short where the wind stands still, and when the breeze stirs they move away again. The rapt mind remains occupied with a string of unruffled thoughts without really thinking a thought through. That was how it was with Parvati these days. As she sat for her puja, her restless mind sped away and made a rushed survey of the village of Talshonapur which she had left behind so long ago, glossing over the bamboo clump, the schoolroom, the riverside. And suddenly it would hide itself in places where she

couldn't find herself. Earlier, a smile may have played on her lips at the thought of the past; now, a teardrop glistened on her palm.

Still, the days passed. They passed in carrying out chores, in making sweet gestures towards others and providing service to the poor and needy; and sometimes they passed in a hermit-daze, when Parvati was lost in a meditative trance. Some called her a goddess in the flesh, a form of Annapurna, the providing deity. Some called her the absent-minded dryad. But for the last few days Parvati seemed to have undergone a transformation—she seemed to have become a trifle sharp, a little harsh. The tide seemed to be waning in the river of contentment. No one knew the cause for this—she had got a letter from Manorama, and this was what it said:

Parvati,

It's been a long time since we wrote to each other and I think the fault lies with both of us. I want to make up with you—let's just both admit to our fault and move on, shall we? I am older than you, so I thought I would break the silence and write first; I hope you'll reply soon. So, my news—I came home to the village last month. How am I? Well, we middle class women, we aren't very good at talking about how we are, are we? Either someone is dead and gone or, if they're alive, they're doing fine. So I too am doing fine, I suppose. That's all as far as my news is concerned, really—pretty boring, you will say. But then I didn't have anything much to say...

I did want to tell you something actually—I've been thinking whether to tell you or not. If I do, you will be hurt and if I don't, I'll feel terrible. It's a no-win situation.

Well, it's about Devdas. I know you'll be upset hearing about him, but I feel just as bad thinking of your misery. I'd say you have had a lucky escape; if you had fallen into his hands, with the kind of pride you have, by now you'd either have poisoned yourself or drowned in the river. Well... what I have to tell you is not a secret—sooner or later you'd have come to hear of it anyway—the whole world knows.

He has been here for the last week or so. I guess you know, his mother has moved to Varanasi and Devdas has been living in Calcutta. He has come home merely to pick a fight with his brother and to take some money. I hear that he comes here quite often these days, and, stays for as long as it takes to get the money. With the cash in hand, he goes away.

It is now two and a half years since his father died. You'll be surprised to know that he has gone through half his inheritance in this short time. I believe Dwijodas is a cautious man and hence he held on to his father's estate—or it would have gone to the dogs by now. Devdas is drowning himself in alcohol and consorting with prostitutes—who can save him now? Death stands very close—he doesn't have long to live. Mercifully, he hasn't married.

I feel so sad for him. His looks, that fair skin, the bright sparkle in his eyes—they're all gone; he seems to be someone else now. Unkempt hair flying in the wind, eyes sunken deep, his prominent nose sticking out of hollowed cheeks—I can't describe how uncouth he looks. He strikes fear and revulsion in the heart. All day long he

roams the riverside with his gun, shooting birds. If his head spins in the hot sun, he sits under the berry tree, head tucked into his chest. At dusk he goes home and drinks. The nights—who knows if he sleeps or roams the streets.

One evening I had gone to the river to fetch water; I saw him walking along the bank with his gun, looking like death. He recognized me and came closer. I was scared stiff. There wasn't a living soul around—I was beside myself with fear. But by God's grace, he behaved himself. Like a harmless boy, he asked me, 'Mano-didi, how are you?'

What could I do? I nodded nervously.

He heaved a sigh and said, 'Be happy, didi. The sight of you all gladdens the heart.' I picked up my pot and ran like the devil was behind me. Oh God. Thank goodness he didn't grab my hand or something. Enough of him—talking of such depraved souls will do us no good.

Did I hurt you terribly, Paro? If you haven't forgotten him still, it *will* hurt. But what's the choice? And, if I have offended your dear soul, please find it in your generous heart to forgive your Mano-didi.

The letter had arrived the day before. Parvati called Mahendra and said, 'I need two palanquins and thirty-two bearers. I want to go to Talshonapur right now.'

Astounded, Mahendra asked, 'I can easily arrange for those. But Mother, why two?'

Parvati said, 'You will come with me, son. If I die on the way, I'll need my eldest son to do the last rites.'

Mahendra held his counsel. The palanquins arrived and the two set off.

When Bhuvan-babu heard of it, he questioned all the maids and servants. But no one could give him a satisfactory answer about the reason for this trip. So, wise man that he was, he sent forth five more guards and servants in their wake. One of the guards asked, 'If we meet them on the way, should we fetch them back?'

Bhuvan-babu considered this and said, 'No, don't do that. Just go along with them and see that they reach safely.'

That evening the palanquins arrived at Talshonapur shortly after dusk. But Devdas wasn't there. He had left for Calcutta at noon that day. Parvati struck her brow and blamed her fate. She did, however, meet Manorama.

Manorama said, 'Paro, did you come to see Devdas?'

Parvati said, 'No, I didn't come to see him. I came to take him home with me. There's no one to care for him here.'

Manorama was truly surprised, 'What? You wouldn't feel ashamed?'

'Why? What is there to be ashamed of—I will take back what is rightfully mine.'

'Oh, shame—don't even talk like that. You are not even related to him.'

Parvati's smile was wan, 'Mano-didi, the words that have lodged in my brain ever since I learnt to think, have a habit of slipping out sometimes. You are like a sister to me, and so you have heard them.'

The following morning Parvati touched her parents' feet and got into the palanquin once more. They headed back to Hatipota.

Chapter 15

For the last two years Chandramukhi had lived in Ashathjhuri village, named after an ancient peepul tree that had let its hanging roots flow into the ground in a large area around itself. On the banks of the river, on a slight gradient, stood Chandramukhi's ramshackle hut. Adjoining it was a shed where a black, healthy cow was tethered. There were two rooms—one a kitchen-cum-store-room and the other the bedroom. The yard was swept and wiped clean—Rama Bagdi's daughter did that every day. Thorny bushes fringed the yard; a berry tree stood in the middle and a tulsi plant had its pride of place in one corner. Chandramukhi had got some men to cut down the palm trees and make some steps from her hut down to the river. She was the only one who used those steps. When the rains came, the banks overflowed and the water lapped around her doorstep. The villagers came running with shovels and spades and dumped some soil to raise the level of the ground. There were no genteel folk in this village, just farmers, some lower castes, a smattering of milkmen and a few cobbler families.

After Chandramukhi had settled in the village, she had written to Devdas. With his reply he had sent some money. Chandramukhi loaned out this money to the villagers. When in trouble, they all rushed to her, borrowed a small sum and went home. She didn't

charge any interest on the loans. Instead, they gifted her the odd vegetables from the fields or milk or grains. She never asked anyone for the money back. Whoever could, returned it; a lot of others didn't. Chandramukhi would only laugh and say, 'I'll never give you money again.'

The villagers went down on their knees and pleaded, 'Mother, pray that we have good rains this year.'

Chandramukhi prayed. But then the crops weren't as good as expected, or the villagers were pressed for taxes, and they came to her again and once again she gave them what she could. Smiling to herself, she said, 'May God grant him a long life—I don't have to worry about money as long as he's there.'

But where *was* Devdas? For the last six months there had been no news of him. Her letters went unanswered. Registered letters came back undelivered. Chandramukhi had helped a milkman's family to build near her hut, paid their son's dowry and bought them some farm implements. They were dependent on her and extremely loyal. One morning Chandramukhi called the milkman, and said, 'Bhairav, do you know how far Talshonapur is from here?'

Bhairav scratched his head, 'Their estate lies at the end of two meadows from here.'

Chandramukhi asked, 'Does the landlord's family live there?'

Bhairav said, 'Yes, all of this area belongs to them. The old zamindar went to heaven three years ago. All the villagers ate hearty meals for a month then . . . Now his two sons run the estate—they're rich, like kings.'

Chandramukhi said, 'Bhairav, could you take me there?'

Bhairav said, 'Certainly, Mother, any day you wish.'

Chandramukhi was eager, 'Then let's go today, Bhairav.'

Bhairav was taken aback. 'Today?' Then he glanced at her face and said, 'Mother, in that case you finish your cooking as fast as you can and I'll bundle up some puffed rice for myself.'

Chandramukhi said, 'I won't cook today, Bhairav; you get ready'

Bhairav went home, wrapped up some puffed rice and sweet molasses in a cloth, slung it over his shoulder, picked up a walking stick and returned in two minutes. He asked Chandramukhi, 'Won't you eat something, Mother?'

Chandramukhi said, 'No, Bhairav, I haven't yet finished my daily puja. If there is time, I'll do all that once we reach.'

Bhairav led the way. Chandramukhi toiled away behind him, walking the narrow ridges between the rice fields. Her tender feet, unused to such hardship, were soon lacerated and bleeding; her face grew hot and flushed in the blazing sun. She hadn't bathed or eaten. But she went on and on, walking across the endless fields. The farmers working the fields stared at her in speechless wonder. She wore a red-bordered white sari and two bangles on her wrists; half her face was veiled with her anchal. When the sun was a few minutes from setting the two of them arrived at the village. Chandramukhi smiled and asked, 'Bhairav, have the two meadows ended at last?'

The sarcasm was lost on Bhairav as he spoke with simple candour, 'Mother, we are here. But do you think your delicate disposition will allow us to go back tonight?'

Chandramukhi thought, 'Forget tonight, I doubt if I'll be able to walk back even tomorrow.' She said aloud, 'Bhairav, can't we hire a cart?'

Bhairav said, 'But of course, Mother. Should I get a bullock cart?'

Chandramukhi ordered him to do just that and entered the zamindar's mansion. Bhairav went the other way, to arrange for a cart

In the inner chambers, the daughter-in-law, now the mistress of the house, sat on the veranda upstairs. A maid led Chandramukhi to her. Both of them looked each other over thoroughly.

Chandramukhi folded her palms in greeting. Dwijodas's wife was covered in ornaments and her eyes sparked with arrogance. Her lips and teeth were blackened by the juice of betel nuts. Her cheek was still puffed up on one side, probably stuffed with tobacco and paan. Her hair was pulled back and tied into a knot, almost on top of her head. On her two ears she wore some twenty to thirty rings and tops. A diamond glittered on her nose and the other nostril had a big hole too—perhaps she had had to wear a nose ring in the days of her mother-in-law. Chandramukhi noticed that the lady was quite stout and plump, dark in complexion, with large eyes and a round face—she wore a black-bordered sari and a brocade blouse. Chandramukhi felt repulsed at the very sight of the woman.

The lady noticed that although she was past her prime, Chandramukhi's beauty defied description. They were perhaps the same age, but of course she would rather have died than admitted that. In this village, she had never seen such beauty, except of course on Parvati. Quite stunned, she asked, 'Who are you?'

Chandramukhi said, 'I am one of your subjects. I owe some taxes and I have come to pay.'

The lady was pleased. 'But why here?' she said. 'Go to the estate office.'

With a slight smile Chandramukhi said, 'Mother, we are poor and hapless, we can't pay all the taxes at once. I've heard you are the

very soul of generosity. Hence I've come to you—if you could let off some of it.'

This was a first for the lady. To be told that she was the soul of generosity, that she could forfeit taxes—Chandramukhi became her favourite person in a minute. She said, 'Well, child, we have to forfeit so much money every day, so many people come begging to me. I cannot say no. The master gets so angry. So, how much do you owe?'

'Not much, Mother, just two rupees. But to us, that's as good as a fortune. I have walked all day to get here.'

The lady said, 'Oh you poor soul, we *must* show some mercy. Oh Bindu, take her outside and tell the head-clerk that I have asked him to let her off the two rupees. So, child, where do you live?'

Chandramukhi said, 'On a corner of your land—Ashathjhuri village. Mother, both the masters are heirs now, aren't they?'

The lady said, 'Hardly. The younger one is as good as gone. Shortly, we'll be the sole heir.'

Chandramukhi was anxious, "Why Mother, is the younger master in debt?"

The lady smiled spitefully, 'All is pledged to me. He has gone to the dogs. Drink and whores, that's all he's into in Calcutta. He has gone through a stupendous amount of money already.'

Chandramukhi's face fell. She paused and then asked, 'So, Mother, doesn't he even come home?'

The lady said, 'Of course he comes home, everytime he needs money. He takes loans, writes off parts of his property and goes away. Just a couple of months ago he came and took twelve thousand rupees. He doesn't even have the will to live ... horrible disease all over his body... what shame ...'

Chandramukhi shuddered. With a drawn face she asked, 'Where does he live in Calcutta, Mother?'

The lady struck her brow and smiled, 'Dear me, does anyone know that? Where he eats, in some roadside shack, and then whose house he sleeps in, only he knows. And death does too, I suppose.'

Suddenly Chandramukhi rose, 'I must go now—'

The lady was a little surprised, 'You'll go? Oh, Bindu—'

Chandramukhi stopped her, 'It's all right, milady, I'll be able to find my way out and to the office.' She walked away slowly. Outside, she found Bhairav waiting for her, the bullock cart ready. Chandramukhi came back home that same night.

The following morning she called Bhairav and said, 'I am going to Calcutta today. You won't be able to come. So I'll take your son with me, shall I?'

'As you wish. But why Calcutta, Mother, is there some pressing need?'

'Yes, Bhairav, it is urgent.'

'When will you come back, Mother?'

'I can't say. I may be back soon, or I may be late. And if I never come back, my house and everything else belongs to you.'

Bhairav was speechless. Then his eyes brimmed with tears, 'What are you saying, Mother? If you don't come back, the folks of this village will die.'

Chandramukhi's eyes were moist too. 'What is this, Bhairav?' she said. 'I've been here only two years, weren't you all alive before that?'

The dense Bhairav couldn't answer that one, but Chandramukhi knew that there was some truth in what he had said. She was taking

Bhairav's son, Kebba, with her. When all her things were loaded on to the cart and she was ready to leave, all the villagers gathered round to see her off. They wept bitterly. Chandramukhi couldn't contain her tears either. What was there in Calcutta? If it hadn't been for Devdas, Chandramukhi would never have turned away from so much love and gone away, not even if she had been offered the crown.

The next day she arrived in Calcutta. Other people now lived in her old place. Khetramani, her neighbour, was surprised to see her, 'Didi, where were you all these days?'

Chandramukhi glossed over the truth and said, 'In Allahabad.'

Khetramani took in all the details of her appearance, from head to toe, and asked, 'Where is all your jewellery, didi?'

Chandramukhi smiled and answered briefly, 'It's all there.'

The same day she met the grocer and asked, 'Dayal, how much money do I have?'

Dayal was caught unawares, 'Well, child, about seventy rupees. I can give it in a day or so.'

'You don't have to give me anything, if you do a few things for me.'

'Like what?'

'It's about two days' work. You must rent a good place in this area, all right?'

Dayal laughed, 'As you say.'

'A good place with a nice bed, clean sheets, lights, paintings, two chairs, a desk—got it?'

Dayal nodded.

'Buy a mirror, combs, two colourful saris, blouses ... and, do you know where to get some fake jewellery?'

Dayal rattled off the address.

Chandramukhi said, 'I need a set of those as well. I'll come with you and select them.' She laughed and said, 'You know all that we need, right? I must have a good maid too.'

Dayal said, 'When do you want all this done?'

'As soon as possible. Within a few days would be nice.' Chandramukhi tucked a hundred-rupee note into his palm and said, 'Get the best of everything, don't cut corners.'

On the third day she moved into the new place. She spent the entire day getting Kebla to arrange things to her satisfaction and in the evening, she sat down to dress herself. She washed her face with soap and dusted it with powder, coloured her feet red, chewed some betel leaf and tinged her lips with red too. Then she decked herself in her new blouse, a colourful sari and the jewellery. After years, she tied her hair and wore a bindi. She studied herself in the mirror and smiled to herself, 'Let's see what else fate has in store for me.'

Kebla, the rustic village boy, was stunned to see this novel way of dressing up and he asked timidly, 'What's this, didi?'

Chandramukhi laughed, 'Kebla, today my groom will be coming.'

Kebla stared at her in bemused wonder.

After dusk, Khetramani came over. She asked, 'Didi, what is all this?'

Chandramukhi gave a covert smile, 'These are all needed again, you see.'

Khetramani stared at her for some minutes and then said, 'As you grow older, didi, you seem to grow more beautiful.'

After she left, Chandramukhi sat down by the window, like in the evenings years ago. She stared down at the street fixedly. This was what she was here for; as long as she stayed here, this was what

she'd do. Some new people did come around; they wanted to come in and they pushed and shoved at the door. As if by rote, Kebla repeated from inside, 'Not here.'

Sometimes an old acquaintance dropped in. Chandramukhi welcomed them in and smiled and talked to them. In the course of the conversation she asked about Devdas. But they knew nothing, and she got rid of them at once. In the dead of night she roamed the streets, went from house to house, eavesdropping, trying to hear something—but the name she wanted to hear was never spoken. Suddenly a stranger with a covered face would reach for her, and she would have to move away hastily.

In the afternoons, she visited her old friends. As they chatted, she asked, 'Do you know Devdas?'

'Who is Devdas?'

Eagerly, Chandramukhi described him, 'Fair, a headful of curls, a mark on the left brow, very rich—spends money like water, do you know him?'

No one did. Chandramukhi had to return home disappointed, downcast every day. She stayed up till all hours, staring out of the window. The advent of sleep only irritated her. She chided herself, 'Is this a time to sleep?'

Slowly, a month went by. Kebla grew restless. Chandramukhi, too, began to wonder if Devdas was in the city at all. Still, she kept at her vigil, prayed fervently and took it one day at a time, always in hope.

Nearly one and a half months after her arrival in Calcutta, one night fate smiled on her. It was nearly eleven at night, she was returning home disconsolately when she suddenly noticed a man

sitting by the wayside, in front of a house, and muttering to himself. Her heart leaped—she knew the voice. She could tell that voice from a thousand others. It was dark here, and the man lay flat on his face, dead drunk. Chandramukhi went near him and shook him lightly, "Who are you, lying here like this?"

The man sang the garbled words, 'Hear me friend, I don't have a love; if Krishna were my husband—'

Chandramukhi was certain now. She called, 'Devdas?'

Without moving a muscle, he answered, 'Hmmm?'

'Why are you lying here? Will you go home?'

'No, I'm fine.'

'Do you want a drink?'

'Yes,' he nearly fell on her in his eagerness. Arm around her neck, he asked, 'Such a good friend—who are you?'

Tears flowed down her cheeks. Devdas stumbled and lurched and stood up with her support. He stared at her face and said, 'Well, well, nice looking face.'

Chandramukhi smiled through her tears and said, 'Yes, pretty nice; now try to hold on to me and move forward. We need a buggy.'

'Of course we do.' As they walked, Devdas asked in slurred tones, 'Hey pretty lady, do you know me?'

Chandramukhi said, 'Yes.'

He leaned against her all the way back home in the buggy. At the door he fished in his pocket, 'Pretty lady, you may have picked me up, but my pockets are empty.'

Chandramukhi quietly dragged him in by the hands, took him to the bedroom and pushed him on to the bed. 'Sleep,' she said.

Still slurring his words, Devdas said, 'Are you up to something? Didn't I just tell you, my pockets are empty. It's no use, pretty lady.'

The pretty lady knew that. She said, 'Pay me tomorrow.'

Devdas said, 'Such faith—it's not good. Tell me the truth—what do you want?'

Chandramukhi said, 'I'll tell you tomorrow,' and she went into the next room.

When Devdas awoke, it was late morning. The room was empty. Chandramukhi had bathed and gone downstairs to prepare lunch. Devdas looked around—he had never come to this room, he didn't know a single object here. He didn't remember anything of the previous night, except that someone had taken care of him ever so tenderly. Someone had brought him here lovingly and put him to bed.

Chandramukhi walked into the room. She had changed her earlier attire. She still wore the jewels, but the colourful sari, bindi, and the betel leaf stains on her lips were all gone. She came in wearing an ordinary sari. Devdas looked at her and laughed, 'From where did you burgle me in here last night?'

Chandramukhi said, 'I didn't steal you away, just picked you up.'

Suddenly Devdas grew serious, 'Be that as it may. But what is all this with you again? When did you come here? You're fairly glittering with jewellery—who gave you all this?'

Chandramukhi looked at him sharply and said, 'Don't.'

Devdas laughed and said, 'All right, can't I even joke about it? When did you come?'

'About one and a half months ago.'

Devdas did some calculations in his head and said, 'So you came here soon after you went to my house?'

Surprised, Chandramukhi asked, 'How did you know I went to Talshonapur?'

Devdas said, 'I went back there soon after you left. A maid—the one who escorted you to my sister-in-law—told me: yesterday a woman came here from Ashathjhuri village, she's very beautiful. That said it all. But why did you get all these ornaments made again?'

'I didn't have them made—these are all fake. I bought them here in Calcutta. Just look at the waste though—I spent all this money for your sake. And you didn't even recognize me yesterday when you saw me.'

Devdas laughed, 'I may not have recognized you, but the caring was familiar. I do remember thinking, who could be so caring but for my Chandramukhi?'

She wanted to weep for joy. After a few moments' silence she asked, 'Devdas, you don't hate me quite as much now, do you?'

Devdas said, 'No, but I do love you.'

In the afternoon as he prepared for his bath, she noticed a piece of flannel tied around his stomach. Frightened, she asked, 'Why have you tied that?'

Devdas said, 'I get an ache there sometimes. But why are you so scared?'

Chandramukhi struck her brow and said, 'Have you gone and ruined yourself—is your liver infected?'

Devdas laughed and said, 'Chandramukhi, perhaps that's what it is.'

The same day the doctor came and examined Devdas for a long time. He was most concerned. He prescribed some medicines and advised that the utmost care was needed, or things could come to a fatal pass. They both understood the upshot of this advice. Word was sent home and Dharmadas arrived; some money was

drawn from the bank for the treatment. Two days passed smoothly after this. But on the third day Devdas had fever.

He sent for Chandramukhi and said, 'You came at the right moment, or you may have never set eyes on me again.'

Chandramukhi wiped her tears and began to tend to him in right earnest. She prayed with folded hands, 'God, never in my dreams did I imagine I would come in so handy at such a crucial hour. But please let Devdas get well.'

Devdas was bedridden for nearly a month. Then he slowly began to recover. The malady was contained.

One day Devdas said, 'Chandramukhi, your name is really long—I can't say it all the time. Shall I shorten it?'

Chandramukhi said, 'Sure.'

Devdas said, 'So from now on I'll call you Bou.'

Chandramukhi laughed, 'Bou? You mean "wife"? But why?'

• 'Does everything have to have a reason?'

'No ... If that's what you want, go ahead. But won't you tell me why you have this wish?'

'No. Don't ask me the reason.'

Chandramukhi nodded, 'All right.'

Devdas was silent for several minutes. Then he asked gravely, 'Tell me, Bou, what am I to you that you are caring for me like this?'

Chandramukhi was neither a bashful, blushing bride, nor a gauche, naive girl; she looked at Devdas serenely and her voice dripped compassion, 'You are my everything—don't you know that yet?'

Devdas was staring at the wall. He didn't take his eyes off it as he spoke slowly, I do, but it doesn't bring much joy. I loved Paro so much, she loved me so much—and yet, there was such pain. After

that torment I vowed never to set foot in this trap again; and I didn't, at least not by choice. But why did you do this? Why did you get me involved like this?' After a while he said, 'Bou, perhaps you will also suffer like Paro.'

Chandramukhi covered her face and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Devdas continued, 'You two are so unlike each other, but still similar. One proud and haughty, the other gentle and restrained. She has little patience and you are so forbearing. She has a good name, respect, and you live in shame. Everyone loves her, but nobody loves you. But I love you, yes, of course I love you.' He heaved a great sigh and spoke again, 'I do not know what the judge of sin and virtue up above is going to make of you, but if we ever meet after death, I will never be able to part from you.'

Chandramukhi wept in silence and prayed fervently, 'Dear God, if ever, in a future life, this sinner is granted pardon, let that be my reward.'

A couple of months passed. Devdas was healed, but he wasn't fully recovered. He needed a change of air. The following day he was headed westwards, accompanied only by Dharmadas.

Chandramukhi begged, 'You will need a maid too, let me come with you.'

Devdas said, 'Impossible. Whatever I may do, I cannot be so shameless.'

Chandramukhi was robbed of speech. She wasn't stupid and she understood him well. Come what may, she could not have a place of pride in the world. She could help Devdas regain his health, she could give him pleasure, but she could never give him

respectability. She wiped away her tears and asked, 'When will I see you again?'

'Can't say. But as long as there's life in me, I will not forget you; I'll always yearn for a sight of you.'

Chandramukhi touched his feet and stood aside. Quietly, she said, 'That's enough for me; I never wanted more than that.'

Before leaving, Devdas gave two thousand rupees to Chandramukhi and said, 'Keep the money. You can't trust life and death. I don't want you to be helpless and destitute.'

Once again, Chandramukhi got the message. So she held out her hand and took the money. 'Just tell me one thing before you go ...' she said.

Devdas glanced at her, 'What is it?'

Chandramukhi said, 'Your sister-in-law told me that you have contracted unmentionable diseases. Is that true?'

Devdas was hurt at that. 'I must say that woman is capable of a lot,' he said. 'If I had such a disease, wouldn't you know? Is there anything about me that you aren't aware of? In this respect you know me better than even Pare'

Chandramukhi dashed away her tears and said, 'Thank goodness. But still, be careful. You are not in the best of health; don't make any more mistakes and make it worse.'

In response Devdas merely smiled.

Chandramukhi said, 'Another request—if you feel even a bit unwell, send for me.'

Devdas looked into her eyes and said, 'I'll do that, Bou.'

She touched his feet once more and ran away into the next room.

Chapter 16

After leaving Calcutta, Devdas lived in Allahabad for some time. From there he wrote to Chandramukhi, 'Bou, I had decided never to love again. For one thing, it is very painful to love and lose, and on top of that, falling in love again would be the biggest folly, I think.'

But as the days passed, Devdas often wished that Chandramukhi could have been with him. The very next moment he'd back off apprehensively, 'Oh no, that won't be good—if Paro ever came to know of it...'

Thus it was Paro one day and Chandramukhi's turn the next, presiding over his heart. Sometimes he had visions of both, side by side, as if they were the closest of friends. In his mind the two had become linked in the strangest of ways. Sometimes, late at night, the thought would come to him that both of them must have fallen asleep. At the very thought that they were unreachable, his heart felt bereft and a lifeless discontentment echoed around it in vain.

Thereafter, Devdas travelled to Lahore. Chunilal was working there; he heard of his old friend's arrival and came to meet him. After a long time, Devdas tasted liquor again. He thought of Chandramukhi, who had forbidden him to drink. He could see her—ever so bright, so calm and collected; she had so much love

for him. Parvati had now gone to sleep where he was concerned. She only flared up from time to time, like the wick of a lamp about to go out.

The climate here didn't suit Devdas. He fell ill often and his stomach ached frequently. One day Dharmadas was almost in tears, 'Deva, you are falling sick again. Let's go somewhere else.'

Devdas answered distractedly, 'Let's go.'

Usually Devdas didn't drink at home. He did if Chunilal came over, but usually he went out of the house and drank. He came home late at night—and some nights he never came back. For the last two days there had been no sign of him. Weeping, Dharmadas refused to touch food or drink. On the third day Devdas came back home, his body burning with fever. He lay down and couldn't get up again. Three or four doctors came and began to attend to him.

Dharmadas said, 'Deva, let me write to Mother in Varanasi—'

Devdas stopped him hastily, 'God forbid—how can I stand before Mother in this state?'

Dharmadas protested, 'Anybody can fall sick; you shouldn't keep it from your mother in these difficult times. There's nothing to be ashamed of, Deva, let's go to Varanasi.'

Devdas turned away, 'No Dharmadas, I can't go to her like this. Let me get well, then we'll go and visit her.'

For an instant Chandramukhi's name came to Dharmadas's lips; but he hated her so much that he couldn't bring himself to utter it.

Devdas also remembered her frequently. But he didn't feel like talking about it. News hadn't been sent out to his mother or to Chandramukhi; naturally, no one came over.

Devdas began to recover slowly over a period of time. One day he sat up in bed and said, 'Dharmadas, come on, let's go somewhere else now.'

He packed his things, bade Chunilal goodbye and returned to Allahabad; he felt much better now. After some months, he asked, 'Dharma, can't we go to a new place? I have never seen Bombay; shall we go there?'

He was so excited that Dharmadas agreed, though reluctantly. It was the month of May and Bombay wasn't very hot. Devdas recovered some more after arriving there.

Dharmadas asked, 'Can we go back home now?'

Devdas said, 'No, I'm doing fine. I want to stay here for some more time.'

A year passed. One morning in August Devdas came out of a hospital in Bombay, leaning on Dharmadas for support, and got into a buggy. Dharmadas said, 'Deva, I suggest we go to Mother.'

Devdas's eyes filled with tears; for the last few days, as he lay on the hospital bed, he had thought that he had everything and yet nothing. He had a mother, an elder brother, Paro who was more than a sister to him—and then there was Chandramukhi. He had everyone, but no one had him.

Dharmadas also wept. He asked, 'So then Deva, are we going to Mother?'

Devdas looked away and dashed away his tears, 'No Dharmadas, I don't feel like going before Mother like this—I don't think the time has come.'

The aged Dharmadas howled in misery, 'But Deva, your mother is still alive!'

They both understood just how much that statement revealed. Devdas really wasn't doing too well. His liver was badly infected and he was racked with coughs and ran a frequent fever. The dark shadow of pain loomed over his face and his body was all bones. His eyes were sunken and shone with an unnatural brightness. His hair was rough and taut—the strands of hair could almost be counted off. His fingers were repulsive, emaciated and marked by ugly sores.

At the station Dharmadas asked, 'I shall buy tickets to go where, Deva?'

Devdas considered this carefully and replied, 'Let's go home first; the rest can come later.'

They bought tickets for Hooghly and boarded the train.

Dharmadas stayed close to Devdas. Before dusk Devdas's eyes stung and the fever had him in its grip again. He called Dharmadas and said, 'Dharma, today I feel as if even getting home will be difficult.'

Dharmadas was scared, "Why, Deva?"

Devdas tried to smile and simply said, 'I have fever again, Dharma.'

When they were passing Varanasi, Devdas was comatose with fever. He came to when they were close to Patna. 'Oh no, Dharma, I suppose I wasn't fated to see Mother,' he said.

Dharmadas said, 'Deva, let's get off at Patna and see a doctor.'

Devdas answered, 'No, let it be. Let's just go home.'

It was the early hours of dawn when the train stopped at Pandua. It had rained all night. Devdas stood up. Dharmadas was fast asleep on the floor. Very softly Devdas touched his brow—he felt too shy to wake him. Then he opened the door and stepped outside. The train left, as Dharmadas slept on peacefully.

Shivering, Devdas came out of the station. He beckoned to the coachman of a buggy and asked, 'Hey there, could you take me to Hatipota village?'

He looked at Devdas, then looked around him and said, 'No babu, the roads are not good. My horses can't go all that way.'

Alarmed, Devdas asked, 'Could I get a palanquin?'

The coachman said, 'No, babu.'

The ground seemed to be slipping away from under his feet and Devdas sat down quickly. Wasn't it meant to be then? His face mirrored his imminent death, there for all to see. The coachman took pity on him, 'Babu, shall I get you a bullock cart?'

Devdas asked, 'How long will it take to reach there?'

'Roads are not good, babu, perhaps a couple of days.'

Devdas calculated mentally, 'Will I live a couple of days?' But he had to go to Paro. His numerous taunts to her, all the mischief he had played on her came to mind. But he had to make his last promise to her come true. He didn't have long to go—that was the problem.

Sitting in the bullock cart, he thought of his mother and the tears flowed. One more face, pure and innocent, floated into his consciousness—it was Chandramukhi's. He had spurned her all his life—she led a life of sin, he had thought. Today, when her face took its pride of place beside his mother's, his tears flowed like never before. He'd never see her again; she may not even get the news until much later. But still, he must visit Paro. He had promised to see her one last time. He felt it was a promise he was bound to honour.

The roads were bad. The rainwater had collected in places and some parts of the road were in bad shape. The bullock cart clattered on slowly. At times the cart had to be pushed and at times the bullocks had to be thrashed mercilessly—but the sixteen-mile-long

journey had to be completed somehow. The chilly wind blew relentlessly and after dusk Devdas's fever came on again. Uneasily, he asked, 'Coachman, how much longer?'

'Another eight to ten miles, babu.'

'Make it quick, my friend. I'll give you a very hefty tip.' He fished out a hundred-rupee note from his pocket and said, 'I'll give you a hundred—please hurry.'

Thereafter, Devdas had no inkling of how the night sped by and the miles were covered; he lay unconscious. When he came to in the morning he asked, 'Hey there, how much longer? Will this ever end?'

The coachman said, 'Six more miles to go, babu.'

Devdas heaved a sigh, 'Please try to go faster, friend—there isn't much time.'

The coachman didn't understand, but he began to whip his bullocks and swear at them with renewed vigour. The cart moved faster and faster as Devdas grew restless within. All he could think was, 'Shall we meet? Will I reach?'

At noon the coachman stopped the cart and fed his bullocks, ate his own lunch and then resumed the journey. He asked, 'Babu, won't you eat something?'

'Oh no, but I am very thirsty. Could I have some water?'

The coachman fetched some water from a wayside pond. In the evening, shaking with the fever, Devdas had blood streaming from his nose. He grasped on to his nose for dear life. Then he realized his gums were bleeding too and he was having trouble breathing. Gasping for breath, he croaked, 'How much more?'

The coachman replied, 'About two more miles to go, babu. We should be there around ten in the night.'

With great difficulty Devdas raised his eyes to the road ahead and breathed, 'Dear God.'

The coachman asked, 'Babu, why are you panting?'

Devdas couldn't even answer.

The cart sped on, but instead of ten, it was almost midnight when it came to a stop under the huge peepul tree before the house of the zamindar of Hatipota. The coachman called out, 'Babu, we've reached. Come down now.'

No answer came.

He called again, and still there was no answer.

He brought the lamp close to his passenger's face apprehensively and asked, 'Babu, are you sleeping?'

Devdas's eyes were open; his lips moved, but no sound came forth. The coachman called again, 'Babu.'

Devdas wanted to raise his arms, but he couldn't; two teardrops rolled down his cheeks.

The coachman had the presence of mind to lay a makeshift bed of hay on the stone platform that ran around the peepul tree. Then he heaved and hoisted, and moved Devdas from the cart and onto the bed. There wasn't a soul in sight; the zamindar's house lay in deep slumber. Devdas struggled to take the hundred-rupee note from his pocket and handed it to the driver. By the light of the lantern the coachman saw that the babu stared at him, but was unable to speak. He guessed how critical his condition was and quietly tied the money into the end of his shawl. Devdas's body was wrapped up in his own shawl. The lantern burned bright and his new friend sat at his feet, lost in thought.

The first rays of dawn touched the sky. People from the zamindar household came out and saw a novel sight. A man lay

dying under the tree—a gentleman; he had on a shawl, expensive shoes, rings on his fingers. One by one many people gathered around. Word reached Bhuvan-babu soon. He sent for the doctor and came around himself. Devdas looked at each one of the visitors in turn; but he had lost his voice. He couldn't say a word. Only the tears kept rolling down his cheeks. The coachman told them all that he knew, but it wasn't much. The doctor came and pronounced, 'Last moments—he'll go any time now.'

Everyone said, 'Poor soul.'

Parvati heard about the dying man too, sitting in her room upstairs, and said, 'Poor soul.'

Someone took pity on him and poured a drop of water into his mouth, as was customary for the dying. Devdas looked at him piteously and then closed his eyes. He drew a few more tortured breaths and then it was all over.

There were debates over who would cremate him, who should be touching him, what caste he was etc. Bhuvan-babu sent word to the nearest police station. The inspector came and took a look: death by cirrhosis of the liver, blood on the nose and mouth. Two letters were found in his pocket. One was from Dwijodas Mukherjee of Talshonapur to Devdas of Bombay: 'It's impossible to send any more money now.'

The second was from Harimati Devi in Varanasi, writing again to Devdas of Bombay: 'How are you?'

On his left wrist the first letter of his name was tattooed. The inspector declared that the man was indeed Devdas.

A blue stone set in gold on his ring finger: worth approximately a hundred and fifty rupees. An expensive but worn out shawl:

approximately two hundred rupees. The inspector made a note of his clothes and all his belongings. Both Bhuvan-babu and Mahendra were present there. When he heard the name Talshonapur, Mahendra said, 'Mother's home town—if she could take a look—'

His father brushed him aside, 'Do you want her to come and identify the corpse now?'

The inspector laughed in agreement, 'Question doesn't arise.'

Although it was now established from the letters that it was a brahmin's corpse, no one in the village wanted to touch it. So the pyre-burners (the lowest of the low castes) came and picked up the body. They did a hash job of burning it beside some godforsaken pond and threw the charred cadaver to one side; crows and vultures perched on it, dogs and wolves snatched at it.

All those who heard about it said, 'Poor soul.' Even the maids and servants were full of it, 'Poor man, decent family, rich too. Two hundred rupee shawl, a hundred and fifty rupee ring, all now in the inspector's custody—and the letters too.'

Parvati had heard the news in the morning, but because she couldn't focus on anything for too long these days, she hadn't really taken it all in. But since everyone could talk of little else all day long, Parvati called a maid to her room just before dusk and asked, "What's the matter? Who has died?"

The maid said, 'Oh dear, no one knows, Mother. It must've been fate that he came all this way to die here. He lay there in the damp and cold since last night and died only at around nine this morning.'

Parvati sighed and asked, 'Did they find out who it was?'

The maid said, 'Mahen-babu knows all about it; I don't know much.'

She sent for Mahendra. He said, 'It's a Devdas Mukherjee, from your village.'

Parvati came very close to him and looked at him sharply, 'Who—? Dev-da—? How do you know?'

'There were two letters in his pocket, Mother; one was from Dwijodas Mukherjee—'

Parvati broke in, 'Yes, his elder brother.'

'The other was from Harimati Devi of Varanasi—'

'Yes, his mother.'

'His initial was tattooed on his wrist—'

Parvati said, 'Yes, he got that done when he went to Calcutta for the first time—'

'There was a blue stone set in a ring—'

'His uncle gave that to him at the time of his thread-ceremony. I must go—' Parvati dashed down the stairs.

Stunned out of his wits, Mahendra said, 'Mother, where are you going?'

'To Dev-da.'

'He isn't there any more. They took him away.'

'Oh no—dear God, help me,' Parvati sobbed as she ran. Mahendra darted forward and blocked her way, 'Have you lost your mind, Mother—where will you go?'

Parvati stared him down indignantly, 'Mahen, do you really take me for a madwoman? Let me go.'

Mahendra looked at her eyes and moved aside, silently following in her wake. Parvati went outside. The officers and clerks were still at work and they looked up, surprised. Bhuvan-babu looked up over his glasses and asked, 'Who's there?'

Mahendra said, 'Mother.'

'What? Where's she going?'

Mahendra said, 'To see Devdas.'

Bhuvan Chowdhury screamed, 'Have you all lost your collective minds—go, go and fetch her. She's mad. Oh, Mahen, oh Parvati.'

Then the maids and servants gathered around and caught Parvati as she fell in a faint; they took her into the house. The next day she regained consciousness, but she didn't speak a word. She just called one maid and asked, 'He came in the night, didn't he? All night long...'

And then she fell silent.

I have no idea what has become of Parvati now, after so many years. Neither do I want to find out. But sometimes I do feel sorry for Devdas. After you've read this story, maybe you'll feel the same way as I do. There is just one thing that I can say. If ever you happen to come across a hapless, unruly rascal like Devdas, please pray for his soul. Pray that, whatever happens, he shouldn't meet with the kind of unfortunate death that Devdas did. Death is inevitable, but at the final moment at least one loving touch should brush his brow; one caring, yearning face should bid him goodbye for ever—he should die with the sight of one teardrop shed in his memory.



One of the most enduring love stories of our times

First published in Bengali in 1917, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's tragic tale of Devdas has enthralled readers and filmgoing audiences alike for the better part of a century.

It is the story of Devdas and Paro, childhood sweethearts who are torn apart when Devdas is sent away to Calcutta by his father, the local zamindar. When Devdas returns to his village, now a handsome lad of nineteen, Paro asks him to marry her. But Devdas is unable to stand up to parental opposition to the match and rejects the proposition. Stunned, Paro agrees to marry an elderly widower.

Devdas returns to Calcutta, but every waking hour of his is now filled with thoughts of Paro and his unfulfilled love for her. He runs to Paro days before her marriage and asks her to elope with him, but she refuses. Heartbroken, he seeks solace in alcohol and in the company of the courtesan Chandramukhi. Chandramukhi falls in love with Devdas, but even when he is with her he can only think of Paro. It is now his destiny to hurtle on relentlessly on the path to self-destruction.

This new translation brings the classic tale of star-crossed lovers alive for a new generation of readers.

Translated from the Bengali by Sreejata Guha

The cover shows Shahrukh Khan, Aishwarya Rai & Madhuri Dixit in **Sanjay Leela Bhansali's** film of **Devdas**



A PENGUIN ORIGINAL
Fiction
India Rs 99

www.penguinbooksindia.com

ISBN 014302926-6



9 780143 029267